

A Few Angry Words

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A few angry words from Neji lead to a great many changes: “Hiashi-sama,” Naruto bowed once more. “I ask you to make a bargain with me.” To be with the girl he loves he makes a bet. The stakes? Only his future and his dream. Nar X Hin

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A secret revealed

The preliminaries to the Chunin exams. Neji and Hinata stood on the arena floor. Neji was enjoying the rare opportunity to openly humiliate a member of the main branch of his clan. As he began mocking her weaknesses he was surprised to be interrupted by shouts from the balcony. Naruto was yelling at Hinata to stand up for herself. As he shouted Neji saw the way she was looking up to the loud mouthed blonde runt. He smiled.

So the princess has feelings for the village pariah does she? How perfect.

"Does he know about your feelings Lady Hinata?"

"What?!" Her eyes suddenly snapped back to him. From her reaction it was only too plain she was even more nervous now than she had been.

He sent her a cruel smirk. This would be an even better way to humiliate her and completely crush her will. He would make it clear to everyone just how pathetic and weak the main branch really was. "Why don't you tell him what you really feel about him? Or perhaps I should."

"Neji please don't!" Hinata pleaded.

Neji turned away from her to stare at the ridiculous orange clad ninja who was still glaring down from the balcony. "Hey loser!" Neji shouted. "Are you upset that I am about to beat up your girlfriend?"

Those words took Naruto totally by surprise and his shock actually overtook his anger. "What are you talking about?"

"What, you didn't know that Lady Hinata has a crush on you? That she likes you?"

Hinata could feel her entire world crashing down around her. She had hoped to earn Naruto's respect and make him really see her. But now instead he was staring at her like she was some sort of pathetic stalker.

"Hinata," Naruto called out. "Is that true?" He had never really noticed her before, but he could see her now. She was standing there all alone trying to be brave as Neji insulted her. He knew what that was like, to be mocked and treated like you were nothing. And as he looked at her he suddenly realized that she was one of the very few people who had never looked at him with anger and never once said a cruel word to him.

He looked down at the balm still clutched in his fist. She barely knew him and he had just beaten her teammate, but she had still given him a gift. Despite everything he had tried to do for Sakura she had rarely even given him a kind word. *She's actually been nicer to me than Sakura-chan ever has. How did I never notice that?*

Hinata could not read his thoughts. All she could do was look at the expression on his face. She took the look of honest surprise and instead thought it was a look of embarrassment. She couldn't stand it and turned her eyes to the floor. She had dreamed of confessing her love to him some day. Now all her secret feelings and hopes were being made public in the cruelest way possible.

Neji could see the obvious effect his words were having and was nowhere near done yet. "Of course even if she is foolish enough to have feelings for you nothing could ever come of it. She is after all a princess and what are you? Nothing but a piece of low born trash masquerading as a ninja."

"What did you say?" Naruto shrieked.

Kakashi grabbed a hold of him and whispered in his ear. "Take it easy Naruto, don't let him provoke you." Kakashi knew just how hard Naruto struggled to gain respect, and how much he hated being treated this way.

"It's actually a shame because the two of you really make a good couple, you're very much alike. You're both born losers who will never amount to anything. You're both pitiful and weak and completely lacking in any of the characteristics of a real ninja. You're destined to be nothing but failures."

"Shut up!" Naruto screamed at him. "Who the hell are you to decide what someone can or can't be?! Hinata can be anything she wants to be! She is brave and kind and strong and I'm sure she'll be a great ninja!"

Hearing the boy she cared about say those things she gasped and looked back up at him. *Naruto...*

"And as for me I'm going to be Hokage one day so don't tell me I'm a loser."

Neji laughed. "If you really do believe that then you're nothing but a self deluded fool. Do you really believe that a worthless piece of garbage like you could ever be Hokage? Those few who become Hokage were born with that destiny. Your destiny is to be nothing but a weak failure."

"Neji," Hinata spoke.

Neji turned and was surprised to see Hinata standing tall and facing him without any sign of nervousness. Instead to his great surprise he saw...

"Your heart beat is rising and from your stance it is very clear," he smirked. "You are now extremely angry. Did my insults to your one true love upset you?"

She was angry. All the fear and nervousness of a moment ago was now forgotten. "You can insult me if you need to Neji, but don't insult Naruto-kun. I have been watching him for a long time now. I only wish I had even half the confidence he has always shown in himself. He has been mocked and hated by almost everyone but he has

never doubted himself for even a moment. He is the strongest person I know and a far greater ninja than you." She looked up to the balcony and directly at her crush. "And when he is Hokage one day I will be the first bow to him."

She really meant it. It wasn't a joke. She really did believe that he would be Hokage one day. Except for Iruka-sensei she was the only one to ever say she really believed in him. And all of a sudden the way she was looking at him he began to get a warm feeling all over.

"You really think that fool is a better ninja than me?" Neji shook his head. "You really are deluded lady Hinata. But enough of this," he suddenly snapped down into a jyuken fighting stance, his byakugan already active. "Withdraw from this match Hinata, or I will be forced to hurt you."

She did not activate her own byakugan or go into a fighting stance. Instead she just stood there with head held high calmly facing him. For once she did not look the least bit shy or nervous. She looked like the heir to one of Konoha's great ninja clans. Kurenai saw the change and smiled proudly at her student. She really had grown.

"I could forgive you for anything you said or did to me, but I won't forgive the way you have insulted Naruto-kun." Hinata said defiantly. "I am going to defeat you."

"Brave words," Neji mocked. "Too bad you're too weak to do anything about them."

Hayate coughed. "If you do not intend to withdraw then please," cough "let's begin the actual match."

"Fine." Neji began to rush forward.

Hinata made a single hand sign. " **Pain.** "

All at once Neji felt as though his brain were being shredded. He grabbed his head and howled in agony. Hidden beneath his hitai-ite

his curse seal pulsed.

Hinata only let it remain active for five seconds. But that was long enough to leave him lying on the arena floor quivering. She had never before used the seal and had never thought she would. But then she had never once thought she could feel so much sheer fury at someone.

Everyone who had just witnessed the match was shocked. Shy quiet Hinata had just crushed the genius with a single move.

"Wow what kind of jutsu was that?!" Naruto wondered. "Man I wouldn't want to go up against her." Hinata was turning out to be a total revelation.

"You wouldn't have to worry Naruto." Kakashi informed him. "She wouldn't be able to do that to you. She can only do that to clan members who wear a seal."

"Huh?"

"As my youthful student Lee pointed out earlier The Hyuga are divided into two branches, the main and the cadet." Guy began to explain as Naruto, Sakura, Lee, and Tenten all listened. The main branch provides leadership while the cadet is expected to carry out all orders. In order to enforce this separation as well as to seal the secrets of the byakugan after death all cadet branch members have a seal placed on their foreheads upon the age of three. Any member of the main branch is able to activate the seal to inflict pain or even death."

"That's just awful." Sakura declared.

"Guy-sensei, why did Neji never mention this before?" Lee asked.

"Yosh, it is not something to take pride in. He did not want to admit that he could be so easily controlled or even killed."

Down on the arena floor Hayate confirmed that Neji could not continue the match. He did not seem injured but was barely conscious. "Winner, Hyuga Hinata."

Hinata slowly nodded and headed towards the stairs. There were no loud cheers as everyone, even Kurenai, was still stunned by what they had just seen. As she climbed the steps her anger faded and she seemed to revert back to the shy insecure little girl everyone was familiar with. She was dreading the fact that she was going to have to walk past Naruto to get to Kurenai and Shino. She could feel herself blush and her index fingers began pressing against each other. After everything Naruto had just seen and heard she could only imagine what he must think of her.

"Hinata?" Naruto called to her.

She brought herself to a halt and gulped as she lifted her eyes to see he was looking at her. "Y... yes Naruto-kun?"

He gave her one of his big smiles and put his hands behind his head. "Do you want to get some ramen with me later, you know like a date?"

Before his eyes she seemed to go five shades of red in the space of about seven seconds. She did however manage to shout out the word, 'yes' just before fainting.

Some good advice

Author's Notes: Since I've begun posting stories on this web site I've discovered some interesting things. The most surprising of which is that I don't seem to be able to judge my own work. By that I mean I have absolutely no clue what people will like. Have no idea what will draw a real response and what will not. The best example of that is my story A Mother's Love . It was the ninth story I had posted and it started, really, because they finally released the name of Naruto's mother along with a few details. I just thought it would be cool to write a story centered around Kushina. The response that first chapter got shocked me as it was about three times what any of my other stories had gotten. Because that story received so much support I devoted a lot of my time and energy into it and it soon took on a life of its own. It is far and away my most popular story having gotten more hits, reviews, story alerts, favorites, and C2s than the rest of my stories combined.

Now don't get me wrong, I am very proud of that story and of the volume of people who seem to really enjoy it. It's just that I don't know WHY A Mother's Love is that popular. The story that I actually consider to be my best is The Hokage Great and Terrible which of course is one of my least popular.

Now why do I bring this up? Because the reaction to this story has also caught me by surprise. I got the idea for it while writing a chapter of A Mother's Love that centered around the Hyuga clan and the caged bird seal. The idea occurred to me and I actually typed it up in about an hour. I just thought it would make a cute little one shot.

So I was just a little surprised when I got over **sixty** reviews, alerts, and favorites, which means that except for A Mother's Love this story has gotten the strongest reception of anything I've written. Don't ask me how it happened because I have no idea.

As I said I had planned this to just be a cute little one shot, but since people seem to really like it I've decided to go ahead and continue it. Hopefully people continue to enjoy it.

Before Hinata could hit the walkway Kakashi caught her and gently laid her down. He gave his blonde student a hidden smile. "As subtle as ever Naruto."

Kurenai seemed to appear out of thin air. "What happened here?" She was trying to sound stern but she couldn't quite keep a tiny smile off her face. She already had a pretty good guess.

Kakashi confirmed her suspicions. "Our young heart throb here asked Hinata for a date. She managed to say yes before passing out."

"I see," she crossed her arms over her chest and looked down at the boy with her red eyes. "Naruto."

Naruto looked back up feeling a bit nervous. "Yes Kurenai-sensei?"

"Hinata is my student and I care very much about her well being. I trust you will treat her with respect and behave like a gentleman." She was careful to keep her tone firm but neutral. She did not want Naruto to think she disapproved of him or was upset at the idea of his dating Hinata. She got the reaction she'd been aiming for as he shook his head violently.

"I promise that I will never treat her any other way!" Naruto declared.

Kurenai smiled a bit and nodded. "Good," she glanced at her student who was coming around. "Are you all right Hinata?"

Hinata opened her eyes to see Kurenai, Kakashi, Naruto and Sakura all standing over her. "I am fine sensei." She quickly got to her feet.

"Well then let's go rejoin Shino."

Hinata nodded. She gave Naruto an embarrassed grin. "Excuse me Naruto-kun, I will see you later."

He gave her one of his big happy smiles. "See you later Hinata-chan."

As she walked away she nearly tripped over her own feet. *He called me Hinata-chan!*

Naruto was feeling very happy about his upcoming date when he suddenly noticed Sakura glaring at him.

"Oh Sakura-chan! You're not mad at me for asking out Hinata-chan are you?"

She planted her fists on her hips and gave him a look he was very familiar with. It was one that said, 'you're an idiot.' "Baka! Why would I be upset by that? I love Sasuke-kun, if this means you're finally going to stop asking me for dates I'm relieved."

"Oh," Naruto was a little disappointed, but not surprised. "Then, uhm, why do you look like you're mad?"

After everything they had been through together in the Land of Waves and Forest of Death, Sakura had gained some respect and even liking of her loud blonde teammate. But even after all this time a large part of her still saw him as the dead last of their academy days, a boy who was completely ignorant of even the most basic social niceties.

"Listen Naruto, I want to make sure that you treat Hinata really well on your date. The poor girl deserves to have you actually make an effort to please her. I mean not only is she really nice but she's had a crush on you since the first year of the academy. So I want you to go out of your way for a change."

"Wait a minute!" Naruto gawked at her. "What do you mean she's had a crush on me?"

"Well duh! The girl has always stared at you with this far away look in her eyes; it was pretty obvious to everyone except you." Sakura told him. "And she has been doing it pretty much from the time she met you."

"But that was four years ago!"

Sakura nodded. "That's right; Hinata has been waiting for this for *four years* so she deserves to have you make a real effort."

"Forehead is right," Ino wandered over to join the conversation. "Not only has she waited since the academy for you but she's probably the only girl in this whole village that would willingly go out with you. So you better make this first date special."

Sakura glared at her rival, even if she did agree with her. "Stay out of this Ino pig."

Ino grinned. "But forehead girl I thought you wanted Naruto to get *good* dating advice."

"Listen you bleach blonde pig I..."

"Hold it!"

Both girls stopped their argument and turned to an upset looking Naruto.

"What?" Sakura asked.

"You both knew that Hinata liked me this whole time?"

Ino laughed. "Naruto, *everyone* knew."

"Then why didn't anyone ever tell me?!" Naruto didn't just sound upset, he really was upset. He had been so lonely for so long that

the thought he might have had someone care for him and not even noticed hurt.

Now both girls gave him the, 'you're an idiot' look. "Why would we have done that?" Sakura asked. "It was Hinata's business when and if she wanted to tell you how she felt."

Ino shrugged. "Besides, we all sort of hoped it was just a phase and that Hinata would snap out of it."

"But now since you are going on a date with her we need to set some ground rules." Sakura informed him.

"Ground rules?" Naruto didn't understand. Dating had rules?

"Your first date needs to be really special." Sakura told him in no uncertain terms. "So no orange! You've been wearing that stupid jumpsuit forever. Show Hinata you care and wear something different, something nice."

"But..."

"Flowers," Ino rolled right over him. "After four years the girl had better get some flowers. I know you don't have any taste so just come by the flower shop and I'll have an arrangement that will be perfect."

"But what if..."

"And no ramen!" Sakura ordered. "I know Ichiraku's is like your second home, but save it for your next date. Take her someplace fancy and spend a little money on her. Make the girl feel like she's worth it."

"Worth it? But I don't..."

"And could you at least *try* and smell nice?" Ino pointed out.

Naruto stood there helplessly as he was bombarded by dating advice.

At the far end of the arena The Third Hokage was watching the little scene play out as he puffed on his pipe. Along with everyone else he'd heard Neji's verbal assault and the responses from Naruto and Hinata. He was disappointed that Neji still held so much resentment, though he had to admit given the boy's circumstances it was understandable. Sarutobi had then watched as Naruto said something that had caused Hinata to faint. And now both Ino and Sakura seemed to be taking terms berating him. He was too far away to hear what was being said, but he could guess.

He looked over at Iruka who was standing close by and smiling fondly as he also watched. "It seems out young Naruto is growing up."

Iruka nodded happily. "Hai Hokage-sama."

Sarutobi took another puff on his pipe. *Though the fact the girl he cares for is the Hyuga heiress might be a problem.*

Through all of this a pair of medic nins had been looking over Hyuga Neji. He had no obvious wounds that required medical treatment so had not been taken to the medical station. Instead the medic nins had simply been there to make sure Neji really was unhurt. After about ten minutes the Hyuga genius was able to climb to his feet.

"I am fine." He said angrily and waved the two medics away.

"Neji there is no need to be hostile towards these men." Guy had also been on the arena floor to check on his student. "They were only looking out for your well being."

"I don't need anyone to look out for me." Despite his hard words he stared about in confusion. "What happened?" He said just quietly

enough for his sensei to hear him.

"What is the last thing you remember?"

"Pain," he answered. "I was about to attack Hinata when..." He stiffened as he realized what had happened. "She used the seal on me!" He glared at his teacher. "That is completely outside the rules!"

"Actually," cough "it's not. I stated right at the beginning that all ninja techniques and weapons were allowed. While," cough cough "what she used was certainly unusual, it was nevertheless within my guidelines." Hayate informed him.

Neji clenched his teeth to keep from screaming. Of course the main house had won! Even when they were weak they still won! They won because the game was rigged. What did it matter that he was a genius and that he never stopped pushing to develop his skills? What did it matter that Hinata was a pathetic nothing? His fate from the moment of his birth was to be the slave of the main branch. That was his destiny and no matter how he fought against it he was doomed to fail.

Guy could see the anger boiling within his young student. "Neji, if you wish I will protest to the Hokage."

"What good would that do?" he snapped. "Do you really think the Hokage would go against the wishes of Hiashi?" He took a deep breath and struggled to bring himself back under control. For a true ninja displays of childish anger were a disgrace. "I apologize sensei," he gave Guy a small bow. "Let us return to the balcony and watch the remainder of the matches."

Before jumping back up to the balcony he looked to where Hinata was talking with Kurenai and where Naruto was talking to the two idiot kunoichi. He *would* show them just how weak they were. He had no idea how or when, but he was going to show them they were nothing compared to him.

Gaara's near killing of Lee changed the mood of all the participants and reminded them all that romantic antics aside they were still involved in a very dangerous business. When the preliminaries were finally completed the nine finalists were standing on the arena floor listening to the Hokage as he explained what would come next. The finals would involve another series of one on one battles to be held in a month's time. They would have that long to rest, heal up, train, and get some new jutsus and surprises ready.

"Now, before I let you go there is one last piece of business to take care of." The Hokage announced.

"Hey come on!" Naruto shouted. "I need to start training now!!"

The Hokage smiled. "Don't be so impatient. There are slips of paper in the box Anko is holding. Each of you take one."

Naruto reached in and pulled out a slip of paper with the number one on it. Hinata pulled out a slip that had the number two.

Once they had all read out their numbers the Hokage nodded. "Good, I will now reveal the match order for the tournament style finals."

It was then revealed that Shikamaru would face Dosu with the winner then facing Temari. Shino would get Kankuro and the missing Sasuke would have to go up against Gaara.

And Naruto would have to fight Hinata.

They both looked at each other, not really sure what to say. Finally Naruto took a deep breath and said what he felt he really needed to.

"So Hinata-chan, how about I pick you up tomorrow at six for our date?"

Trust

Following the end of the preliminaries and the selection for the finals the different groups returned to Konoha.

Hinata had waited patiently by the door for his eventual return. When Neji arrived he spotted her and immediately tried to go in the other direction.

"Neji I want to apologize to you." Hinata said.

He froze, but refused to turn around to look at her. "An apology? For what would you need to apologize to me for Lady Hinata?"

She flinched slightly at his tone. His voice was perfectly measured, with just the slightest trace of contempt coloring his politeness. There was no anger in his voice, but Hinata knew it had to be there. That he could hide it so well scared her.

"Big brother Neji, I apologize for activating your seal and wounding you. I am truly sorry that I did that." Even though his back was turned she gave him a low bow. "Please forgive me."

"Forgive you?" Now he did turn around to look at her. "Do you think a few words and an empty gesture are enough to make me forget everything that has been taken from me?"

Now she could see his anger begin to poke through the calm façade he usually wore. "Neji, until today I have never done anything to deliberately hurt you. I know what has been done to you and how you have suffered, I am very sorry for all of it. But I can only apologize for what I have done."

"You know nothing about how I have suffered. How could you? Do wear this damned seal? Do you live your life knowing that you are a

slave? You were born a princess with every advantage. You know nothing of what it's like to suffer simply because of you are?"

"That is where you are wrong Neji. I have suffered because of who I am." She said quietly.

Neji had a fresh retort but Hiashi came out of his study. "Hinata, I wish to speak with you."

She sighed; there was only one correct answer. "Yes, father." She looked back to Neji. "Can we talk later?"

"Of course," he gave her a bow that seemed more than proper. "I am after all at your service." The words and tone were perfect and Hiashi thought them properly respectful.

But Hinata knew better. As she watched her cousin stride quickly away she knew things were as bad as ever, maybe worse. She headed towards her father's study. There was nothing she could do right now. But she promised herself she would keep trying to fix things between them.

Iruka and Naruto were walking through the village together. Iruka was smiling at his favorite former student.

"Anything on your mind Naruto?" He asked innocently. "You've been pretty quiet."

Naruto looked up at his old teacher with an embarrassed grin. "Uhm, Iruka-sensei if I ask you about something will you promise not to laugh at me?"

"You have my word Naruto."

Naruto began scratching the back of his head nervously. "Well... I sort of have a date with Hinata-chan tomorrow."

"Well that's great!" He reached down and began rubbing the top of his head messing up his hair. "It's about time you two got together."

Naruto hated when Iruka did that, it felt like he was being treated like a kid. "Hey! Iruka-sensei did you know that Hinata liked me too?"

Iruka chuckled. "Naruto, everyone in the class knew except for you."

He gave his sensei a betrayed look. "Then why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it was never my secret to tell, it was Hinata's. It was always her decision when or if to tell you what she felt. After all would you want me to talk about your secrets?"

Naruto quickly shook his head. "No."

"Then please extend the same courtesy to Hinata." Iruka frowned a bit. "After all, Neji was not trying to be kind when he revealed her feelings."

The reminder made Naruto want to chew nails. "That guy was such a jerk, I mean how could anyone be so cruel to Hinata?!"

Iruka sighed. "I'm not excusing what he did Naruto, but keep in mind he has reasons for his resentment."

"Yeah I heard about that, but whatever the clan did to him he shouldn't take it out on Hinata."

"I'm not saying you're wrong Naruto, I'm just saying there are real reasons why Neji feels so much resentment. But anyway, what did you want to ask me about?"

Naruto looked embarrassed. "Well... Sakura and Ino gave me all these different rules about how I should be on the date. Pretty much they want me to be totally different from how I normally am."

"Different how?"

"They want me to dress up, not eat ramen, eat slowly, say 'please' and 'thank you' a lot, bring flowers, and a whole lot of other stuff. If Hinata likes me for who I am why am I supposed to act so different just because we're on a date?" Naruto complained.

Iruka chuckled a bit at Naruto's vehemence. "Naruto, there's a difference between changing who you are and acting on your best behavior. No one is telling you to be someone else, but don't you want to show Hinata you care? The reason to dress up and bring flowers and make all the extra effort is in order to show the person that they matter to you and are worth that extra effort. Does that make sense?"

Naruto thought about it, and slowly nodded. In his entire life he had never been invited to any sort of formal event. No one ever cared how he was dressed and only a few people (Sarutobi, Iruka) even cared how he behaved. Mostly people just glared at him and wanted him to go away. That was why when someone actually *wanted* to be with him that person immediately became very precious. And if getting all dressed up and bringing her flowers and eating somewhere other than Ichiraku's would make Hinata happy, then he would do it. Though there was a problem.

Naruto looked down at the ground. "Iruka-sensei?"

"Yes Naruto?"

"I... I don't really know anything about what someone should wear on a date." He absolutely hated admitting that he needed help. "And I'm not really welcome in most restaurants besides Ichiraku's. Could you..." He cut off when he felt Iruka's hand gently fall on his shoulder. Naruto looked up to see a warm smile on his sensei's face.

"I'll tell you what Naruto; the Hokage was kind enough to release me from my teaching duties for the rest of the day. If you don't mind putting off your visit to the hospital I'll take you clothes shopping. I also have a friend that owns a little café where I am sure you and

Hinata would be welcomed. I'll even take you to get some ramen after we're done and give you a few tips if you want."

"Thank you sensei!" A relieved and very happy Naruto glomped onto Iruka.

Iruka noticed a few people staring as the boy clung to him, but he didn't care.

"So you used the caged bird seal to defeat Neji?" Hiashi asked.

"Yes father." Hinata answered. Her father had called her in to relate everything that had happened during the second phase of the exams. She told him everything as accurately as she could, with the exception of Naruto's involvement. She did not mention Neji's insults or the fact that she had a date. She knew her father would not approve of her being involved with him. That left her with no choice but to keep everything about Naruto a secret for as long as she could.

She stood there waiting for him to rebuke her as he always did. She was ashamed of what she had done to Neji and she fully expected to be on the receiving end of his disapproval.

Her father nodded. "Well done Hinata, you have brought glory to the Hyuga clan."

"I have? How was what I did to Neji glorious?" Her father never praised her. And she had certainly not expected praise for what she had done.

"Victory is always glorious Hinata." Her father stated. "By reaching the finals of these exams at your age you prove to all the strength of our clan."

"But I only did it by using the seal." She protested. "There can't be any honor in that."

Her father shook his head. "Victory is victory Hinata, no matter how it is achieved. I would have much preferred you to have defeated Neji in actual combat, but the important thing is that you *did* defeat him. Perhaps the manner of his defeat is even a blessing; Neji has been growing a bit arrogant due to his obvious skill. Perhaps this public humiliation will remind him of his proper place."

Hinata felt a bit sick that this was the thing that had earned her father's approval.

Hiashi looked at his daughter carefully; she seemed a bit more certain of herself than she had before. Perhaps she was finally developing the strength required to lead the Hyuga clan. "Hinata, I have decided to take over your training for the next month. Not only the entire village but many important foreign lords and even the Kazekage will be attending the finals. I expect you to show all of them what it means to be of the Hyuga clan."

She stood up straighter. Her father had stopped training her in favor of Hanabi a couple years ago. This was a chance for her to try and earn his respect. "I promise to work very hard father and do my very best."

He nodded, satisfied with her answer. "I expect nothing less from you Hinata."

Naruto and Iruka were sitting at Ichiraku's with five shopping bags filled not only with clothing but some new ninja gear as well. Iruka had insisted on his getting not one but several new outfits as well as some nice sharp kunai and shuriken.

"Thank you so much Iruka-sensei, but you didn't have to pay for everything."

Iruka shook his head. "I don't mind Naruto, I'm very happy to help. But if you want to repay me just tell me how your date goes and we'll call it even."

"A date?" Ayame looked over excitedly. "Naruto do you have a date?"

Naruto gave her a big cheesy grin and began rubbing the back of his head. "Yeah," he admitted.

"That's wonderful! Who is it with?" Ayame asked.

"This really amazing girl named Hinata. She's part of the Hyuga clan but she's really kind and sweet, she is just the nicest person in the whole world." Naruto found himself eager to tell people that such an amazing girl liked him. The truth was he would have liked to have climbed the Hokage monument and shouted it to the whole village.

"Awww, that is so sweet!" Ayame said happily.

Back in the kitchen old man Teuchi was also smiling. "Good for you Naruto, it's about time a girl appreciates what a good young man you are."

Naruto felt really happy to hear some of his precious people supporting him. It was not something he was used to.

"Naruto, there you are." A familiar voice called out. Iruka and Naruto turned on their stools to look as Kakashi and a guest entered the ramen stand.

Seeing Kakashi's guest Naruto immediately jumped off the stool and began pointing. "Hey! What is that pervert doing here?!"

"Pervert?" Kakashi looked confused.

"Ah, just a slight misunderstanding from before." Ebisu quickly put in.

"You two have met?" Kakashi asked. "Well that should make things easier." He looked at his student. "Listen Naruto I've been looking for you. I need to discuss your training for the next month."

"Oh yeah! I can't wait, a whole month of training with no dumb missions chasing that stupid cat. I want you to teach me a whole bunch of cool new jutsus Kakashi-sensei."

Iruka was surprised to see how uncomfortable Naruto's eagerness seemed to make Kakashi. Normally he would have expected a sensei to be thrilled to have a student so willing to train.

"Naruto, I'm afraid I won't be able to train you."

Naruto suddenly seemed like a balloon whose air had been let out. "Huh?"

Kakashi looked a bit embarrassed. "I'm afraid I've got other things going on and I wouldn't be able to give you my full attention."

"What sort of things?" Iruka demanded. "You are Naruto's Jonin sensei. What could possibly take priority over getting him ready to try and become a Chunin?"

Kakashi really wished he hadn't run into Iruka along with Naruto. Iruka was an old friend and the way he was glaring was making this much harder than it should have been. "It's true that I am Naruto's sensei, but he isn't my sole responsibility."

With that statement the truth struck home like a thunderbolt. Naruto pointed an accusing hand at his sensei. "Oh! This is about Sasuke isn't it? You're dumping me to only train him!"

"It's not like that Naruto."

"Are you sure Kakashi?" Iruka stood up and stood right behind Naruto. "That is certainly how it sounds. You have *three* students, not just one. You cannot simply ignore the others to focus on a favorite."

"Kakashi, Naruto needs your help. How can you just ignore him?" Ayame put in.

Kakashi was feeling a bit ganged up on. "Now hold it, I'm not abandoning Naruto. I have found him an excellent instructor."

"You mean the pervert?! No way am I letting him train me."

"How rude," Ebisu declared. "I will have you know I am an elite instructor of the ninja arts and normally accept only the very best applicants. The only reason I have agreed to take you on is because it is a personal request from Kakashi."

"I don't care!" Naruto shrieked. "I am **not** working with that pervert, no way, no how!"

Iruka sighed and put a hand down on Naruto's shoulder. The boy immediately looked up at him. "Actually Naruto, Ebisu *is* an outstanding teacher and could probably teach you a lot." Iruka gave Kakashi a hard look. "If your sensei is going to refuse to help you then I think you should give him a try."

Naruto still looked upset but nodded. "All right Iruka-sensei, if you think so I'll give it a try."

Kakashi was surprised to see how easily Iruka was able to not only calm Naruto down but get him to agree. He noticed the way Naruto was looking at Iruka. It was a look he had never seen on Naruto's face before. It was a look of complete and total trust. Naruto normally did not fully trust others, not even him or his teammates. But it was quite clear that he had total trust that Iruka would not betray him and would always look out for his best interests. To his surprise Kakashi suddenly felt a small pang of jealousy. That was the sort of relationship he'd enjoyed with Minato-sensei, and he'd hoped to have it with his own students.

He'd tried his hardest to develop that with Sasuke, but the boy was much too closed off emotionally to actually trust someone. Sakura didn't seem interested in a relationship with anyone but Sasuke. And Naruto? The student who needed his help the most? Somehow he always wound up an afterthought. He'd assumed that given Naruto's

past he would never be open to that sort of close relationship, but obviously he'd been wrong.

Have I really neglected the boy that much? He was a bit ashamed when he admitted to himself that he had. And now he was going to neglect him for an entire month. But what could he do? If Sasuke was going to have any chance of beating Gaara he would need every possible minute of training. *I'll make it up to Naruto after the exams.*

"Well I'm glad to see that's settled. I'll see you later." Kakashi disappeared in a swirl of wind and leaves.

"Stupid," Naruto muttered beneath his breath.

Iruka could see how bitterly disappointed Naruto was to have Kakashi abandon him in favor of Sasuke. Iruka decided he would report this directly to the Hokage. No matter how special Sasuke might be Kakashi owed more to his other students than to simply pawn them off to someone else.

"So teach me something pervert." Naruto called out.

"How rude! Do you call Kakashi that?" Ebisu demanded.

"Sometimes," Naruto replied. Iruka coughed and Naruto glanced up to see a warning look. "Fine," he muttered beneath his breath. "So are you going to teach me something Ebisu-sensei?"

Ebisu nodded, slightly relieved. "I will teach you a great many things, starting with chakra control. Trust me Naruto, if you listen to what I have to teach you and work hard, in a month's time you'll be a much stronger ninja than you are now."

Now that sounded interesting. One thing that no one could ever say was that Uzumaki Naruto wasn't willing to train hard. "So let's get started."

Ebisu nodded. "Very well, it's getting late but I suppose we can get a couple hours of practice in. Follow me; we're going to the hot springs."

Naruto slurped down the last of his ramen. Iruka promised to take care of the bill and bring his new clothes to his apartment.

Ebisu and Naruto arrived at the hot springs to begin working on water walking. Neither of them noticed a spiky white haired ninja walking away as he scribbled furiously into a notebook.

Getting ready

Of all the ninja in the village of Konoha Ebisu, Ibiki, and Guy shared something in common. On the face of it that statement might seem incredible. After all it would be hard to imagine three more different leaf nins. Ibiki was a sadist. Ebisu a pris. And Guy was... well Guy. On the surface it was hard to see what they shared beyond the fact they were ninja of the leaf. But if you could look underneath the underneath it suddenly became clear.

They were each recognized as the best in their field and each of them loved what they did.

Oh other ninja enjoyed their work as well, but if they were honest all of them would admit that there was something else they preferred. For instance, though Sarutobi enjoyed certain aspects of being Hokage and took great pride in his duty, when he dreamed he dreamed of being a painter and of being able to paint without anyone interrupting to inform him that Naruto was spraying graffiti on his face... again. Kakashi certainly enjoyed the excitement of being on a dangerous mission, and there was no rush to equal life and death combat. But given the choice he'd have preferred to be in a nice shady park somewhere with a brand new issue of Icha Icha in his greedy little hands. Kurenai dreamed of being a farmer in a quiet village. Asuma dreamed of making Shikamaru cry as he beat him for the twentieth straight time playing shougi. Nearly every ninja in the village had some hobby or past time they enjoyed more than they did their work.

Except for Ebisu, Ibiki, and Guy. Ibiki really was a sadist who enjoyed breaking an opponent's will with nothing more than words. Guy was an artist whose art just happened to be taijutsu. Anything that improved his skill or built up his strength and endurance he relished. And there was nothing in the world he liked better than to face a worthy adversary in a desperate battle. And Ebisu? To put it simply he loved to teach. As a warrior or as a spy he was competent,

but no more than that. But as an instructor in the ninja arts he really was brilliant. And what Ebisu liked best of all was to bring out the hidden potential of a student.

And at the moment he was really enjoying himself.

Naruto was not.

"Hey you big pervert what is the point to this?!" Naruto shouted.

Ebisu sighed, Naruto seemed determined to ruin his good mood. He took out some shuriken. "I've already told you Naruto, this is to improve your chakra control." Ebisu threw one aimed straight at Naruto's belly.

"Aaack!" On pure instinct the blonde ninja leapt to the right.

Ebisu timed it perfectly and snapped off a pair shuriken aimed at where his feet were about to land. Naruto twisted in mid air and yanked his feet up. He shot out his hands and they both struck the water, for just a second he thought he was going to plunge in. Both of his palms sank about wrist deep into the water but finally stopped. He was actually able to perform an impromptu cartwheel and end up back on his feet scowling at the man who seemed determined to either puncture him or drown him.

Ebisu nodded and even allowed himself a small smile. Early this morning they had been at the hot springs and Naruto had still been struggling to just stand on the water without sinking. Now several hours later they were at training ground fourteen standing on a large pond. Not only had Naruto learned how to walk on water, he was able to leap, dodge, roll, and even cartwheel if necessary. In one day he had figured out how to release a steady flow of chakra out of whatever part of his body came in contact with the water, and he was doing it on instinct, without conscious thought. Even skilled Genin would normally need at least a few weeks to learn how to do this. To come this far in just one day...

Ebisu shook his head. He was really starting to believe the reports that the boy had learned the Kage Bushin no Jutsu in just a few hours. This boy had absolutely unbelievable potential, in his judgment at least as much as Uchiha Itachi or Hatake Kakashi had possessed as children. What had all those idiots at the academy been doing to let all this raw talent go to waste?

They were probably all just as ignorant as I was, well except for Iruka I suppose. He was willing to admit to himself that he had prejudged the boy as nothing more than a demon when they had first met. But Naruto had really surprised him by being a good role model for Konohamaru. And now he was surprising him yet again. Seeing how quickly Naruto could pick things up had left Ebisu shaking with excitement. This was the sort of opportunity that a teacher dreamed of.

Even if Naruto could make things a bit difficult some times.

"So are you done trying to kill me yet?" Naruto demanded.

Ebisu pushed his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose. "Those strikes were all non lethal and frankly a Chunin would be expected to dodge them easily."

Naruto grumbled a bit. "So what now?"

Ebisu glanced at his watch. "You said you wanted to finish by five, it is a quarter to five now. Why don't we go ahead and stop for the day? Meet me here again by 7 a.m. I have a great many things in mind for you and I don't want to waste any time."

Naruto had a relieved grin on his face, the torture was finally over. "I'll see you tomorrow you closet pervert." He waved a cheerful goodbye and leapt away.

Ebisu shook his head. "How rude."

As Naruto was rushing over the roof tops his heart was pounding and there was a smile on his face. He was excited, not just about his date tonight, but about his training. The day had been long, tiring, and more than a little scary. But he had *learned* things! All right, maybe he hadn't learned anything really interesting yet, but at least he wasn't stuck with a teacher who ignored all his pleas for training.

He had never really had any teacher give him a lot of personal instruction. Most of his academy instructors had gone out of their way *not* to help him. Iruka had been the very first to genuinely try and teach him, but he'd been in charge of 29 other students and just hadn't been able to give him that much personal time. Kakashi had still *never* given him any personal instruction. The one useful thing that Kakashi had taught him, tree walking, had been taught to the whole squad. Despite begging, pleading for knowledge Kakashi had simply not been interested in teaching him. Though he did seem quite willing to teach Sasuke.

Now suddenly, for the first time in his life, he had a teacher who was totally focused on him. Ebisu might be a pervert, and nowhere near as cool or tough as Kakashi, but at least he actually wanted to show him things. Naruto suddenly wondered if maybe that was part of the problem. Maybe Kakashi was just too cool to bother teaching anyone but the precious Uchiha. Whereas the closet pervert was not cool at all and so didn't have a problem with it. He didn't suppose it mattered, just so long as he had the chance to keep learning new things.

Hinata had her hands on her knees and was desperately trying to catch her breath. Her father had spent the last eight hours trying to instruct her in a pair of special clan techniques. One an ultimate defense, the other what could be called an ultimate attack. She was struggling with both, but she was determined to keep trying.

By comparison her father seemed hardly winded at all. He looked at her with a neutral expression. At least he was not openly displeased with her effort. "You will need to continue working very hard Hinata.

You must have both of these techniques perfected by the time of the finals."

"Yes father," she got out between gasps.

"We are done training for the day, we will commence again at six tomorrow."

"Father," she took a deep gulp of air. "May I leave the mansion to go visit my friend Sakura?"

He nodded. "You are free to do as you like for the remainder of the day. But I expect you to be asleep in bed by eleven."

"Yes father." It was now a little after five. She would need to take a quick shower and go over to Sakura's. As she hurried up to her room and her private bath her heart was still pounding. All she could think about was that she would soon be on a date with her precious Naruto-kun.

"I see," Sarutobi said quietly. "I must confess I was unaware of Kakashi's training methods."

"So far as Naruto's concerned there are no training methods. That's the problem." Iruka spoke unhappily. Kakashi was a friend, but he couldn't stand by and ignore the way he was shirking his responsibilities.

Sarutobi took a long puff on his pipe. "Unfortunately, a great many members of the Council would approve. Many of them would be happy if Naruto got no significant training, just so long as Sasuke did."

"Is that how you feel Hokage-sama?" Iruka asked.

"No, of course not, however where Sasuke is concerned I am required to tread carefully. Anything that is seen as harming his

chances in the upcoming finals would draw their immediate opposition."

"What will you do then Hokage-sama?"

"I think I will have a long talk with Kakashi."

"Hey Naruto!"

He had just arrived at his apartment. He was eager to take a shower and get dressed. He and Hinata had agreed to meet at the café. But he still needed to pick up the flowers too. Given all that he was in a bit of a rush and hadn't noticed Kiba and Shino waiting outside his apartment building. Hearing Kiba call out to him he came to a sudden stop.

"Hey guys what are you doing here? I'm sort of busy; I have a date with Hinata tonight."

Kiba rolled his eyes. "I know that baka, that's why we're here."

"Say, you're not mad at me for kicking your ass are you?"

Kiba and Akamaru both growled. "You didn't kick my ass! You just got lucky; I would take you apart if we fought again."

Naruto grinned. "Sure."

Shino decided to speak up in his normal placid tone. "We have not come here to discuss the past. Rather my teammate and I are present to express our concern over potential inappropriate behavior in a social circumstance."

"Huh?"

Kiba snorted. "We're here to let you know that if you do anything to break Hinata's heart we're going to break your skull." Akamaru

barked loud agreement. "Hinata is a really good girl and we both care about her a lot. So don't try anything with her or you'll regret it."

"Hey I'm not that kind of guy. Of course I'm not going to hurt her."

"Good," Kiba informed him. "After all she's had a thing for you since the academy."

"Indeed," Shino agreed.

"Aw come on! You guys knew too?!"

Kiba laughed. "Everyone who wasn't a total baka knew."

"Thank you again for allowing me to come over." Hinata said. "I can't lie to my father. This way I can honestly tell him I'm going out to see you."

Sakura grinned. "No problem, I'm more than happy to help. I mean if things go well with you two I'll finally have him not asking me for dates all the time."

Hinata looked a bit embarrassed. "Thank you for that too."

Sakura looked a tad confused. "What?"

"Thank you for never accepting and going on a date with him."

Sakura had a look of surprise on her face, just before she burst out laughing. "Yeah, like I'd ever put myself through that!"

Hinata looked unhappy. "Sakura..."

"Oh I'm sorry, I mean I know you really like him but come on! He's loud, annoying and dumb. I mean let's face it, he's no Sasuke."

Hinata smiled a bit. "You're right, he is not Sasuke. He is not cold, arrogant, and completely self centered."

Sakura gawked at her. She'd never heard any girl say anything negative about her precious Sasuke-kun. "Don't insult Sasuke!"

"Then don't insult Naruto." Hinata shot back. "I am sick of hearing people say bad things about him, especially when it's people who should know better. Naruto is brave, kind, and he never ever gives up. He is very special and I am not going to let people say mean things about him."

Sakura stared at the girl. Since that whole thing with Neji it looked like shy little Hinata was finally learning to stand up to people. *Well I suppose it's only fair. I would stand for Sasuke if he was insulted.* "You're right Hinata, Naruto is a good guy." *Though he still doesn't compare to Sasuke-kun.* "Say is that what you're wearing for your date?"

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" She had on her usual bulky beige jacket and dark pants.

"Well this is your first date with the guy you have feelings for. Don't you think you should wear something special for the occasion?"

Hinata began to blush a bit and press her index fingers together. "I uhm, wasn't really sure what to wear."

Sakura grinned. "Oh I have the perfect thing!" She hurried to her closet and pulled out a light blue dress. "I think this will fit you."

It was a very pretty dress and a modest one. It would show some of her shoulders and her legs below the knee. Even so it would reveal a bit more than she was used to. "Ah, I don't know."

"I guarantee that Naruto would love to see you in it."

Would he? "Do you really think so?"

Sakura nodded and handed the dress over. "I know so."

The little bell above the door jingled as it was opened.

"Welcome to the Yamanaka flower shop," Ino called out automatically.

"Hey Ino." Naruto replied.

She actually needed a second to recognize him. "Naruto! Is that you?"

He gave her a confused look. "Who else would I be?"

"I almost didn't recognize you." It was true; he looked completely different without the orange jumpsuit. He had on a long black leather jacket that went halfway down to his knees, a white shirt, and black pants. It was basic, but looked really good. *He actually looks kind of hot!* Ino was surprised at herself for thinking that, but it was true. "Wow Naruto you clean up pretty good."

He gave her an embarrassed grin and rubbed the back of his head. "Uhm, thanks, so do you have my flowers?"

"Right here." She handed him a small bouquet of red roses and white lilies. "The lilies are Hinata's favorite and they symbolize purity and devotion."

"What about the roses, what do they symbolize?"

Ino gave him a sly smile. "Love." He immediately looked nervous. "Relax Naruto, I guarantee you she won't take these flowers to mean you're pledging your love to her." *Probably.*

He carefully nodded, they were just flowers. "How much do I owe you?"

"No charge," Ino said happily.

"But..."

"Just think of it as my little way of cheering the two of you on."

"Thanks Ino, that's really nice of you."

"So where are you taking her?' she asked innocently.

"To a little place called Café Miruki."

"Oh, I've been there. It's very nice I'm sure Hinata will love it."

"Thanks again Ino." Naruto exited the shop.

As soon as he was gone she shouted. "Mom! Can you cover the counter? There's somewhere I have to go."

"So where are the two of you going?" Sakura asked off handedly.

"We're meeting at Café Miruki."

"Well I'm sure the two of you will have a great time."

"Thank you again Sakura." Hinata hurried off not wanting to be late.

Almost as soon as she was gone the phone rang.

"Hello... oh hey pig... yeah I know, Café Miruki." Sakura couldn't help but giggle. "I'll meet you there."

First date

The Café Miruki was a small outdoor restaurant that specialized in serving coffee and was known for its delicious baked goods. They also had a small menu of hot food as well. The café was a small one story building with a large open area with twenty big round tables. Since coffee was an expensive import it had a reputation for being both exclusive and rather expensive. Which made it exactly the sort of place where Naruto had never been welcome.

He was standing about half a block up from the café nervously holding on to the flowers. He would soooo rather have been going to Ichiraku's for this. But if this was going to make Hinata happy then he would do it. He just hoped Iruka-sensei's friend wouldn't throw him out or, even worse, let him just sit there a couple hours without anyone bringing him food. He had experienced both before finally discovering a haven in Ichiraku's.

Across the street from the café was a three story apartment building. From the roof it would provide a perfect view of the café.

"Hurry up Ino-pig." Sakura called as they both climbed up the side of the building.

"Relax forehead girl," Ino answered as they both reached the top. Where they quickly realized they were not alone. "Hey! What are you two doing here?"

Kiba and Shino turned to look at them from the roof's edge.

"We are present to maintain a watchful surveillance on our compatriot to ensure she does not suffer any needless mental anguish." Shino replied calmly.

"Huh?" Sakura cleverly responded. Ino just blinked and looked lost.

Kiba sighed. "We're here to make sure Naruto doesn't try anything stupid."

"Oh," Sakura said. "Well yeah, so are we."

Ino smiled. "Actually we're sort of hoping he gives her a kiss or something. Forehead and I have a bet on how long she'd be unconscious."

"Are you being troublesome again Ino?" The four of them turned around as Shikamaru and Chouji both climb over the other side and on to the roof.

"What are you two doing here?" Sakura asked.

"I called and invited them to come watch." Ino stated.

"It's troublesome," Shikamaru gave a lazy shrug. "But I figure it might be entertaining."

Chouji suddenly produced three large bags of chips. "I brought snacks for everyone."

So in short order the six of them were lined up at the roof's edge watching.

When Naruto finally spotted her he did a double take. It was the very first time he had ever seen Hinata in a dress. He had always sort of thought of her as this weirdo, sort of dark and plain and timid. But now he saw what an incredibly pretty girl she was. (Along with the dress she was also wearing lipstick and blush for the first time in her life, thanks to Sakura.) His heart beat began picking up as it really began to dawn on him that this pretty girl, who was maybe prettier than Sakura, liked him. He also felt the urge to kick himself for not realizing it sooner.

When she'd turned the corner she'd started looking about for Naruto. She was a bit worried when she didn't spot him. She looked over at a boy in a black leather jacket with some flowers wondering if he might have seen someone in an orange jumpsuit. When she saw that the boy in the jacket holding flowers was actually Naruto she nearly tripped over her own feet. She had never seen him in anything but that jumpsuit. She had always thought Naruto very cute. Seeing him dressed up she thought he looked really, really... hot. Of course she immediately began to blush.

Hinata slowly approached him until they were standing face to face. Both of them were sort of staring at each other, unsure of what to say. Naruto opened his mouth to ask her if she was feeling sick, her face was really red, but he quickly closed it. One of the many, 'ground rules' Sakura and Ino had given him was not to ask her if she was feeling sick or comment if he saw her blush. Desperate to say *something* he suddenly stuck the out flowers.

"These are for you Hinata-chan! You look really pretty!" He said in a panicked rush.

"Th... thank you Naruto-kun." She took the flowers from him. "They're beautiful!" Lilies and roses, symbols of devotion and of love. She was sure Naruto did not know their meaning, but was still very happy at his choice.

Seeing her smile made him feel really good and he relaxed just a little bit. "I guess we should go ahead and get to the restaurant." He said. She nodded happily. He held out his arm the way Ino and Sakura had advised him. He really wanted to be a total gentleman. "May I have the honor of escorting the beautiful lady?"

Beautiful? Did Naruto-kun really just say I was beautiful? Please Kami, if this is a dream don't ever let me wake up. She put the flowers in her right hand placed her left gently on his arm. "I would like that Naruto-kun."

Feeling very happy, but still nervous, he led them towards the café.

"Awwww!" Both Sakura and Ino said and began giggling.

Independent of each other Kiba and Shikamaru both rolled their eyes.

As they neared the café a man in a dark grey suit grinned towards them. Where a left arm should have been the sleeve was pinned up. The man looked like was in his twenties and aside from the missing arm seemed to be in good shape. He had dirty blonde hair and gold colored eyes. At their approach he gave them both a sweeping bow.

"Welcome, I am Miruki, and I am guessing you are Naruto and this is your lovely date for the evening Hinata."

Naruto nodded, relieved that he was not going to be refused service in front of Hinata. "Yeah we are."

Miruki nodded still smiling. "Come right this way I have a table reserved for you."

The restaurant was nearly full and as the two of them followed Miruki a number of people looked up from their meals to stare. Some of the looks were simply surprised or curious. More than a few were openly angry and upset. For Naruto this was nothing new and it barely registered with him. It didn't look like anyone was going to get up and say anything to them. So far as Naruto was concerned it was enough.

Hinata saw the glares as well. She definitely noticed them and they upset her. She couldn't understand why people had to treat him this way. Yes, Naruto played pranks and maybe he was a bit loud at times, but what had he ever done to deserve such looks? She wanted to shout at them to stop. Wanted to tell them that he was

kind and brave and risked his life to protect others. She wanted to tell them that he deserved their respect and thanks not their hatred.

Naruto glanced over to her and saw how she was looking at some of the people in the restaurant. Naruto had always been a bit of an enigma in the fact that he could be so oblivious to some things (a young girl's feelings) while being very perceptive about others (the scars on Lee's hands.)

"It's all right Hinata-chan." He whispered to her.

She looked over to him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it's all right if some people give me angry looks. I'm used to it."

She shook her head. "It's not all right Naruto-kun. No one else is treated this way and there's no reason you should be."

Hearing the concern in her voice he slowly gave her a warm smile. "Thank you Hinata-chan, it makes me really happy to know that you care."

Of course hearing the gentle tone of his voice she blushed again.

"Here you are," Miruki had led them to a table near the back. It was next to only one other one where three middle aged civilians were sipping coffee and having cake. "Your waitress will be with you in a moment. If you're interested we have a really delicious chocolate pound cake. If you need anything at all just let me know."

Naruto nodded, truly grateful at the man's kindness. "Thank you."

Miruki departed and they sat down.

The folks at the next table consisted of two men and one woman. The woman glanced over at them. "Oh what a beautiful bouquet dear." She smiled at the young girl. "Did he give that to you?"

Hinata nodded excitedly. "Yes Naruto-kun did. He is very thoughtful and kind."

The woman smiled. "Well I am sure he is dear."

One of the men at the table spoke. "I am sure he is a fine gentleman and will treat you well."

Naruto nodded, "I would never treat Hinata-chan any other way."

Their waitress came over and they ordered their meal as well as some chocolate cake for dessert.

"Well she hasn't passed out yet so I guess it's going pretty good." Kiba admitted.

"You know I have to admit I'm surprised. I've seen Naruto eat before. Usually he's like a hungry pig at a trough; he's actually showing some manners for a change." She chuckled. "I guess he paid attention to all the advice we gave him."

"Or maybe he just figured since he was with *you* eating like that would be appropriate." Ino teased.

"What?!" Sakura said angrily.

Shikamaru opened his eyes. "Thanks for ruining my nap."

The meal went really well. The food was excellent and the cake was absolutely to die for (Naruto got seconds and thirds.) Though they had both started off a bit nervous they had slowly relaxed and begun opening up in each other's company. They avoided painful subjects, Naruto didn't talk about growing up alone and despised and Hinata avoided all mention of her family life. They actually got comfortable enough that Hinata was able to bring up a subject that had been weighing on her mind.

"Naruto-kun," she asked. "What are we going to do about fighting each other?"

He looked over to her seriously. "We're going to do our very best Hinata-chan." He nervously reached across the table and took a hold of her hand. (Do I actually need to say that she turned as red as a tomato?) "I really like you Hinata-chan and to me you a very precious person. But we are ninja and we have a duty to try our very best. I fought Kiba as hard as I could and I don't have any bad feelings towards him. Even though he was acting sort of tough the next time I saw him I don't think he has any towards me either. That's what we'll do; we'll fight as hard as we can, and when it's over no bad feelings."

She nodded. "I agree with you Naruto-kun, it's just," she hesitated.

"What?"

"I don't want to hurt you," she said miserably. "I don't ever want to be someone who causes you any pain even if it's not intentional."

He smiled. "It's ok Hinata-chan," he answered quietly. "If anything happens it's fine because I know you didn't mean it. We're ninja after all; you can't ever enter a fight without taking a chance. And I want you to know that I would never deliberately hurt you either. If something happens it happens, but we we'll fight clean and hard, no holding back. Promise?"

She looked in his eyes and knew he wanted her to agree to this. "I promise Naruto-kun, no holding back."

The waitress came over with the bill. Naruto took a look at it and went a bit pale. It seemed like Gamachan was about to go on a serious diet. He was surprised when the bill was snatched out of his hand.

"Sorry about that," Miruki tore it up. "It's a... a special policy of my restaurant. We never charge a couple on their first date." He smiled.

"Really? That is so cool." A relieved Naruto said.

Hinata nodded happily. "That's wonderful; I'm going to tell all my friends so they'll come here for their first dates."

Miruki's smile slipped a bit. "Oh... uh that's great."

Naruto got up from the table. "Can I walk you home Hinata-chan?"

"Of course Naruto-kun."

Miruki was still standing there shaking his head after they'd gone. He could just picture a stream of young teens coming to his restaurant all declaring they were on their first dates.

"That was really nice of you Miruki, I owe you one." One of the men at the next table said.

Miruki looked over, "yeah you do. But it's all right. They seemed like good kids."

At the table there were three puffs of smoke. When the smoke cleared Iruka, Kurenai, and Asuma were sitting there grinning.

"Did you see how happy Hinata looked?" Kurenai gushed. "The poor girl certainly deserves it."

Asuma laughed. "I'm just surprised she didn't pass out."

Iruka said nothing but just sat there content. He was happy to know that Naruto was finally with a girl who cared for him rather than chasing one who barely tolerated him.

"I'm sorry Naruto-kun," she looked embarrassed. "But I think it's best if we stop here. I should go the rest of the way on my own." They had gone to Sakura's to allow her to change back into her regular

clothes and wipe off her make up. They were about five blocks from the Hyuga mansion.

Naruto nodded, he understood. "Did you have a good time Hinata-chan?"

"Oh yes! Thank you Naruto-kun it was wonderful."

He looked at her a little nervously. "So... do you want to go out with me again?"

"Yes!" She almost shouted.

He was actually relieved to get that answer. Deep down he always felt unworthy and worried that people would realize it and want nothing to do with him. "Since we both have to do a lot of training how about we agree to meet outside Sakura's house each Sunday at 6 until the exams are over."

"All right." She said happily. *He wants to keep seeing me!*

"Then I guess I'll see you Sunday." Without warning he reached out and gave her a hug. "Bye Hinata-chan!" He left feeling very happy.

Hinata stood there in a daze as she watched him go. He had hugged her and he was going to see her again Sunday. She was very happy and had a huge smile on her face.

Then she fainted.

From a nearby roof top they could see Hinata finally stir and get back up.

"Three minutes and twenty seconds," Shikamaru called it.

Ino grinned and held out her hand. "My time was closer, pay up forehead."

"Whatever," Sakura grumbled as she handed over a fifty ryu note.

A very depressing conclusion

They had been training for five days, and while Naruto was willing to admit he'd learned a few things, he was still frustrated.

Ebisu had no trouble reading the signs of frustration in his student. Not that he really needed to rely on signs when it came to Naruto.

"The leaf exercise," Ebisu said.

"Oh come on!" Naruto exploded. Why do I have to do that again?!"

"Because it helps you refine your chakra control." Ebisu answered patiently. He had given him the exact same answer the last twenty times he'd complained.

"I thought you were supposed to help me get ready for the finals."

Ebisu nodded. "That is precisely what I am doing Naruto."

"How is anything you've taught me supposed to help me in the finals? I mean lifting a leaf using my chakra, yeah that's real useful. Making regular bushins? Well I could have used that six months ago but what good does it do me when I can make kage bushins? Water walking might actually be useful some day but unless we're having the finals on a lake it doesn't help me now. So would good is all this supposed to do me?"

Ebisu let out a sigh. "Tell me Naruto, how does a baby learn to walk?"

"Say what?" Naruto gawked at the man wondering if he had somehow misheard. "How the heck should I know? I don't know anything about babies,"

"Think about it Naruto, do you think a baby would be able to just immediately get up and begin walking?"

Naruto frowned and gave it some thought. "I guess not. I suppose they'd have to start crawling first."

Ebisu nodded. "That's correct. Before we walk we have to crawl. That is essentially what you are doing right now. I know a number of advanced techniques that I can teach you, but they would be useless until you possess the necessary amount of chakra control." Ebisu decided not to mention the fact that after six months as an active Genin he should *already* have had much better chakra control. *What exactly did Kakashi teach this boy in all that time?*

With the words, 'advanced techniques' Naruto's interest was suddenly peaked. "Are these combat techniques you're going to show me?"

"Oh yes, depending on your type I have a number of very effective jutsus that I can teach you."

Naruto frowned. "What do you mean my type?"

"Well, every person's chakra has an affinity to one of the five elements. Certain rare individuals can have an affinity for two or more. Now once you have gained the necessary skill you will be able to work jutsus of all five elements; fire, water, earth, wind, and lightning. However you will always be able to do more with jutsus centered on your own element."

Naruto looked confused. "I don't get it."

"Well, maybe it would be easier for me to just show you." He began working some hand signs. " **Earth Dragon Missile.**" The ground immediately began to shake. Out of the ground about fifty feet away what looked like a dragon made of dirt and rock leapt up about twenty feet into the air before crashing back down again.

"Whoah!" Naruto said excitedly.

"Now watch carefully Naruto." He performed some more hand signs. "**Water Dragon Missile.**" From out of the pond another dragon leapt into the air, this one noticeably larger, it rose perhaps fifty feet before crashing back down into the pond and sending out a huge spray.

"All right!" Naruto cheered enthusiastically. He was already thinking about using these jutsus on a certain mopey dark haired teme.

"Now, did you notice any difference between the jutsus I just used?"

"Well yeah, the water one was a lot bigger."

Ebisu nodded. "That's right, but I used the same amount of chakra for both."

"You did? Then why was the other one so much bigger?"

"Because I am a water type. That means I have a natural affinity for water jutsu. If I am using a water jutsu I need only about half as much chakra to perform it as someone of a different type would. Alternately, I can use the same amount of chakra and get about twice as powerful an effect. One of the reasons the Uchiha were so feared was because they were such strong fire types they were able to use fire jutsus at only a third or a fourth the normal cost of chakra. That meant in combat they were able to use three or four times as many fire jutsus or make them three or four times more powerful. A *very* useful advantage."

Naruto nodded, his eyes glazing over. "So does that mean I'll be able to do that to?"

"Well probably not to the same extent, but yes. Of course, that's only if you're a fire type." Ebisu explained.

"So how do I find out what type I am?" Naruto asked excitedly. He was imagining himself spitting out massive fireballs the way he'd seen Sasuke do."

"There's a test, and I'll give it to you, but not until I think you're ready. Now the leaf exercise please."

Naruto groaned but put a leaf in his hand. Using his chakra he made it slowly lift into the air.

The following day Naruto arrived at training ground 14 right at 7 a.m. he and Ebisu had agreed to work twelve hours until seven at night, with just a short lunch break. On Sundays they would knock off at five to let him get ready to see Hinata. Ebisu was already there waiting for him and ready to go. Naruto was enjoying the change of having a sensei actually show up on time.

Ebisu motioned to him to come over and held a piece of blank paper. "Good morning Naruto, I hope you had a good night's sleep and a nice breakfast because we will be very busy today."

"Hey I'm ready!" Naruto gave him an eager smile. He usually had plenty of energy and today was no exception.

"I am very happy to hear that Naruto because as of right now I will begin teaching you the jutsus and techniques that you will use in the finals."

"You mean no more wasting time with chakra control?"

Ebisu frowned a bit. "Nothing we have done so far has been a waste Naruto. We had to set the foundation before we could build on it. But yes, we are done focusing on chakra control, though we will continue to try and improve it."

"Cool! So teach me something!" Naruto was actually jumping up and down he was so excited. *Jutsus, jutsus, jutsus...* The thought ran through his brain. This was what he'd been dying for since leaving the academy. The chance to finally learn some cool new jutsus that he could actually use in a fight.

"I will, but first I want you to take this and focus some of your chakra into it." He handed Naruto a slip of paper.

"What's this for?"

"This is so we can find out what your elemental affinity is. This is a special paper made from trees that were grown using chakra. When you focus your chakra into that paper it will reveal your type, if you are a fire type the paper will burn, water it will get soaked, wind it will tear in half, lightning it will wrinkle, and if you are an earth type it will crumble away."

Naruto excitedly focused his chakra into the paper. It immediately split in two.

"Well now, it looks like you're a wind type, that's interesting."

"Aw man," Naruto felt disappointed. "I really wanted to be a fire type like teme."

"Actually Naruto, being a wind type is far better." Ebisu said.

"You're just saying that."

Ebisu shook his head. "No, there are more than a few fire types in Konoha. But so far as I know there is only one other wind type. That means you will have an automatic advantage as most people who face a Leaf nin won't expect him to be using wind based jutsus. Add to that wind jutsus are actually the most effective for long and medium range attacks." He gave Naruto a sly smile. "I don't know as many wind jutsus as I do water or fire, but the ones I do know are very effective. For instance, how would you like to be able to blow down a tree at a hundred yards?"

Naruto's eyes grew into saucers. "You can teach me that?"

Ebisu nodded. "I certainly can, now listen closely Naruto. We only have a little over three weeks left before the finals. I am going to do

everything I can to help you become a Chunin. Now because we have limited time I need you to give me complete and total effort every minute we are training together. And to give you your best chance I want you to promise to keep everything I teach you secret until after the finals. And that's for everyone including your sensei, your friends, and Hinata."

Naruto nodded his head vigorously. "I'll do just as you say sensei, and that's a promise."

"All right, then lets get started. This will be your first wind based jutsu..."

Naruto spent the rest of the day learning new attack jutsus and getting them down. The two of them actually worked non stop for twelve hours, somehow they forgot about lunch.

That evening in Sarutobi's office Kakashi felt like he had been caught doing something wrong, though he wasn't sure what.

"Am I in trouble?" Kakashi asked.

Sarutobi eyed him calmly from behind his desk. "No, but I did think we should have a conversation about your student's training."

Kakashi gave a big smile from beneath his mask. "Oh there's nothing to worry about there. Sasuke is making great progress. I'll definitely have him ready for the finals."

Sarutobi frowned hearing that answer. "Actually I was referring to one of your *other* students, Naruto."

"Oh, I see, I take it this has to do with my decision to concentrate on training Sasuke while having Ebisu help Naruto."

Sarutobi nodded. "Why are you only training Sasuke in preparation for the exams?"

He felt like squirming under Sarutobi's calm stare. "There are two reasons really. Sasuke has been targeted by Orochimaru. I want to stay near him just in case there's another attempt to either kill or kidnap him."

Sarutobi raised an eyebrow. "You would still be present if you were training them both."

Kakashi scratched the back of his neck. "True, but having Naruto there might make the situation more dangerous and I wouldn't want him unnecessarily put in harm's way."

Sarutobi just did not accept that. A ninja's life involved being in danger after all. If Kakashi were really *that* worried about another attempt he could have asked for additional ANBU support. "Indeed, and what is your second reason?"

"Well, having seen what Gaara did to Lee I've decided Sasuke will need all my time in order to prepare for his match and to give him the best chance to win. He is a lot like me and I think I can get him ready, but only if I put everything into it. The truth is if Naruto was there it would take away time from Sasuke and the end result might be Sasuke's defeat or even his death."

Sarutobi was forced to nod his agreement. It was not fair to Naruto, but Sarutobi had to admit that there was a certain hard logic to it. Sasuke was the last, 'true' Uchiha and as such he was a special treasure of the village. He had to be given the best possible chance to not just survive but triumph. "I can understand, and so you arranged for Ebisu to train Naruto instead?"

"That's right."

"And what arrangements did you make for Sakura?"

Kakashi blinked. "Excuse me?"

Sarutobi frowned at him. "Haruno Sakura, your third student. Though she did not reach the finals she does still remain your responsibility. She cannot perform any missions while her two teammates are committed to training only. I presume you arranged for some one to see to her training as well."

Kakashi looked a bit embarrassed. "Well, actually... she sort of slipped my mind."

"Slipped your mind?" Sarutobi echoed.

"Well I was busy planning Sasuke's training and arranging for new security measures and then I had to track down Ebisu and get him to agree to take in Naruto. I ah, just sort of forgot about her while I was taking care of everything else."

"I see," Sarutobi shook his head. "Well right Hinata's training has been taken over by her father. It should be easy enough to integrate Sakura onto team eight for just a short time."

Kakashi nodded in relief. "Great, was there anything else?"

"Kakashi I would like you to answer me one question. What have you taught your students up until the Chunin exams?"

"What?"

"I want you to tell me specifically what jutsus or techniques you have taught your students in six months as their instructor."

"Well I mostly work on team building exercises and let them spar with each other a bit. I try and encourage them to find their own way and be self reliant." Kakashi said.

"Self reliance and team building are fine lessons, but if they are to truly survive on dangerous missions they will still need greater skills. What jutsus or techniques have you taught them? Be specific Kakashi."

He hesitated for a moment before answering. "I taught them how to walk up trees."

Sarutobi waited. "And?"

"Well technically that's the only technique I showed them."

Sarutobi stared at him in honest wonder. *Six months and he only taught them a single technique and no jutsus? And the only reason he is making an effort now with Sasuke is due to fear of his opponent.* Considering these facts Sarutobi was left with no choice but to reach a very depressing conclusion. *He is unfit to be a Jonin sensei.* He let out a depressed sigh.

"Kakashi, I realize I was the one who convinced you to take on a team rather than remain in the black ops. But perhaps I made a mistake."

Kakashi suddenly stood up straight. "What do you mean by that Hokage-sama?"

"Kakashi, let us be honest. The fact is you have failed in your duty as a sensei. All three of your students are woefully unprepared. There is no shame in admitting that some people are not cut out for teaching and preparing others. Perhaps it would be for the best if you were returned to the ANBU once these exams are complete."

"Hokage-sama please reconsider," he said worriedly. "I admit that perhaps I have been too lax as their instructor. I was used to leading ANBU after all and I admit I didn't really understand how different leading a squad of Genin would be. But the truth is I care about my students, and I give you my word I will work much harder in instructing them. Please do not take my team away from me."

Sarutobi looked at him and thought it over. "I will consider it and reach no final decision until the exams are complete. After all one or both of them may be promoted, which would alter the situation." He let out another small sigh. "Very well Kakashi you can go."

Two lonely children

Naruto looked over at the pretty girl sitting next to him. For their second date she had on a white sun dress with flowers imprinted on it. He thought she looked really, really cute. For his part he had on his leather jacket again with a tan shirt and khaki pants.

"You don't mind getting ramen with me do you Hinata-chan?" Naruto asked nervously. "I mean I know it's not as fancy as where we went for our first date but I really like it here and the ramen they serve can't be beat!" *And I can actually afford it here.*

Hinata smiled back at him. "I'm happy with wherever you want to go, as long as we're together."

Naruto actually blushed a bit and rubbed the back of his head.

"Here you go," Ayame said cheerfully. "One shrimp ramen and one beef ramen." She set the two bowls down in front of Hinata and Naruto. Ayame gave the girl huge smile of approval. "You know I'm very pleased to finally meet you Hinata. Naruto has talked about you so much I almost feel like I know you."

"Naruto-kun has talked about me?" Hinata felt a little nervous.

"He sure has." She gave Naruto a glance and saw him looking scared. She tossed him a quick wink before going on. "He's told us that you're shy but very sweet and kind hearted and a really strong ninja. He says that you're one of the few people who have never given him an angry look or a cruel word. Oh, and he also says that you're much cuter than Sakura."

"Ayame-chan please!" Naruto cried out as his face turned red.

"Well you did," Ayame grinned.

Naruto got the weirdest feeling that if he had an older sister this is what she would be like.

"We're both very glad to see Naruto with someone who cares about him." Old man Teuchi called from the kitchen. "Naruto's a good young man and he deserves to finally find someone who cares about him."

Hinata looked down to try and hide her blush. All these kind words and approval were embarrassing her, and making her happy.

For his part Naruto was at a rare loss for words. Teuchi and Ayame along with Iruka and Sarutobi were the closest thing he had to family. He was happy to hear them say they liked Hinata, but it was embarrassing at the same time. He decided to begin eating so that he wouldn't have to say anything. As he ate he reminded himself to eat slowly and use good manners.

As they ate Naruto found himself struggling to make conversation. It wasn't that he had any problem talking to the girl or that he was lacking things he wanted to tell her. The problem was...

"I'm not allowed to tell you anything about my training." He was honestly frustrated. He was *finally* learning some really cool jutsus and he couldn't tell anyone! "Ebisu-sensei has been working me really hard but I'm starting to pick up some really cool moves. I mean you would never think it to look at him but he actually knows a lot of stuff and he's a really good teacher!" He paused. "Well he's not as good as Iruka-sensei of course, Iruka's the best. But the closet pervert is pretty good."

"Well I'm happy to see you so excited Naruto. The training must be going really well."

"Oh it is! I just wish I could tell you about it! Some of the stuff he's showing me is just so cool." He frowned. "But sensei made me

promise not to tell anyone what I'm learning until after the exams are over."

Hinata simply nodded. "I'm not surprised Naruto-kun. Surprise is a key element to victory. I would love to tell you what I've been working on but I'm not allowed to either."

"You're working with your dad now right?" She nodded. "What is that like?"

She stopped to think about it. "Hard, he doesn't take it easy on me just because I'm his daughter. In fact he usually goes harder because of that. But... I think he's happy with my progress so far. He never actually says so, but he doesn't complain either which is a really good thing." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I want to make my father proud."

Naruto looked at her confidently. "I'm sure you will Hinata-chan."

Hinata looked a little uncomfortable. "But Naruto-kun, for me to do well doesn't that mean you have to do poorly?"

"No Hinata-chan," he said confidently. "We can both do great. Sensei explained it to me. Even though it's a tournament you don't have to be the final winner to be promoted. The Hokage and a bunch of important people will be judging and how well they score you determines if you get promoted or not."

Hinata nodded, she already knew the procedures for the finals. "That's true Naruto-kun."

"So if we have a really awesome match and show everyone what kick ass ninja we are we'll both get promoted no matter who wins."

He sounded so confident! Like there was no possible doubt as to the outcome. That confidence, that absolute faith in himself was something she had always admired in him. How she wished she

could feel that away. "You're right Naruto-kun I'm sure we'll both do well."

He nodded as though there could be no question. He finished off the last of his ramen and slapped some money down on the counter. He looked out and saw the sun was just beginning to set. "Hinata-chan, would you like to go somewhere special with me?"

"Somewhere special?" She began feeling excited and nervous. "Su... sure Naruto-kun."

"Great!" He grabbed her hand and the two of them bolted. "We need to hurry though! We have to get there before sunset." He shouted a goodbye to Ayame and Teuchi as he ran.

Ayame laughed once they were gone and looked to her father. "Have you ever seen Naruto eat that slowly before?"

Her father laughed as well. "Never, not even when he was with Iruka or his team. The boy really cares about what that girl thinks of him."

Ayame nodded her agreement. "First love is so sweet!"

Neji looked as his teammate without any sympathy at all. "I want to keep going."

Tenten was bent over at the waist with her hands on her knees gulping down air. She was used to acting as Neji's training partner since neither of them could survive the hellish pace that Guy and Lee usually set. She was used to hard training at the speed Neji liked to set. But since the preliminaries Neji had started pushing himself almost as hard as Lee or Guy.

"Give me just a minute; we've been going eight hours straight!" She put her face down and began huffing again.

He frowned at her, these days she was probably the closest thing to a friend that he had. But friendship wasn't what mattered. "If you're too tired to continue then go home, I'll train alone."

She looked back up again. She cared about him so much, but sometimes he treated her like a total stranger. "I said I would keep going, but can we just take a short break?"

He was about to snap at her, but reigned himself in. He reminded himself that it was not her fault that didn't have as much endurance as he did. He recognized she was a damn fine kunoichi (a hundred times better than Hinata!) and about the only person he could count on to help him train. So instead of yelling at her he gave her a curt nod. "All right we'll break for fifteen minutes."

With a relieved sigh she immediately sat down in the thick grass and pulled out a canteen. Neji took out a canteen as well but remained standing.

"Guy should be here," he muttered. "He should be fulfilling his duty as sensei, not spending all his time at the hospital."

Tenten frowned at that. "Neji he did train us today."

"Only for a few hours!" Neji said angrily. "He should be here now trying to help me become stronger."

"He's trying to help Lee." Tenten defended her sensei's actions. Guy-sensei might be eccentric and more than a little weird, but he was a great teacher who truly cared for his students. She thought it spoke well of him that he was so concerned over Lee's welfare.

"Lee will never be a ninja again." Neji said flatly. "Lee should accept his fate and move on. Guy-sensei should also accept this and realize Lee is no longer his concern."

"Neji how can you say that? Lee is our friend and teammate. How can you be so cruel as to just give up on him and expect Guy-sensei

to do the same?"

"Life is cruel Tenten." Neji stated coldly. "Especially for those who try to defy their fate. Lee was never meant to win that match. He resorted to a forbidden technique to try and alter that fact. His injuries and the end of his shinobi career are a result of his attempt to defy destiny." Neji suddenly looked away at a flight of birds high above. "Those who try to defy fate are fools."

Then what does that make you Neji? She put away her canteen and got back up. "All right I'm rested. We can continue now." She took out some kunai.

Neji nodded and got into his fighting stance. *Am I a fool like Lee? Perhaps. Will I end the same or worse? Very likely. But I won't stop until I show the world the weakness of the main house.*

"This is so beautiful Naruto-kun!" The two of them were sitting beneath a large tree atop the Hokage monument. They had a spectacular view of the setting sun. She looked over to the boy sitting right next to her. "How did you ever find this place?"

He looked a bit embarrassed and rubbed the back of his head. "Well I sort of came across it while trying to hide from the ANBU after one of my pranks."

She giggled. "Well it's nice to know *some* good came out of those pranks."

Naruto gave her a hurt look. "Oh come on Hinata-chan some of those pranks were very artistic."

"You mean like that time you set off that cherry bomb in the teachers' bathroom?" Hinata asked.

Naruto shivered at the memory. "Yeesh, I have never seen Iruka-sensei get so mad." It was fall and with the sun leaving the sky it

quickly got cooler. He noticed Hinata shiver a bit. "Want to share my jacket?"

"Oh, ah, all right." Hinata said shyly.

Naruto pulled his jacket off and draped it over the two of them as he held Hinata close to him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her to his chest. "Is that better?"

Her heart was pounding like mad. She had never been this close to him. She pressed her face against his neck and hoped her blush wasn't too bad. "Ye... yes, much be... better, arigato."

The two of them sat there in silence as the sun finally disappeared and the sky became a deep violet slipping into black. Naruto discovered he really liked having Hinata so close to him. Growing up he had been denied more than the bare minimum of human contact. It was one of the things he always longed for. That was why he was always ready to hug at the drop of a hat. Having Hinata in his arms comfortably resting against him reminded him that people were never meant to be alone.

"Hinata-chan, how long are you allowed to stay out?"

"I have to be in bed by eleven, so it's safe for me to stay until about ten thirty."

"Could we just stay like this until then?" He suddenly felt a lump in his throat. "I'd really like to just hold you for awhile."

She looked up into his face and smiled. "I would like that too Naruto-kun."

He nodded slowly and gave her a worried look.

"Is something wrong?"

He took a deep breath. "Are you my girlfriend? I know there are a whole bunch of rules to dating but I just wanted to know if after two

dates does that mean we're boyfriend and girlfriend?"

She could feel her face getting hot, but she did not look away. "Do you want me to be your girlfriend?" She asked softly.

"Yes," for a change it was Naruto who was struggling to get his words out.

She slowly smiled at him and pressed her face to his neck again. "Then yes, I am your girlfriend Naruto-kun and you are my boyfriend."

Little more was said. The two of them were content to just remain in their comfortable and warm silence. They were two lonely children who had finally discovered that they didn't have to be alone anymore.

A training tool

15 days down and 15 left to go. Ebisu was very pleased with the progress Naruto had made so far. He had greatly improved his chakra control and had gotten down two jutsus. Now it was time to work on his taijutsu. They were both standing out in the middle of the pond. In general they did their entire workouts there. It was an excellent way to force Naruto to constantly work on his chakra control even while concentrating on other things.

"All right Naruto," Ebisu pushed his glasses back up and took a starting stance. "We've worked on chakra control and ninjutsu. Now I want to see about your taijutsu. I want you to attack me as hard as you can using taijutsu only. I will only defend; I want to see what you can do."

"All right!" Naruto shouted. Eager to show off his fighting skills he ran forward. He leapt in and attacked Ebisu with a shower of punches. Ebisu blocked them without much trouble. Naruto tried a leg sweep only to have his opponent jump up to avoid it. He tried more moves and surprise combos attacking with a fierce joy eager to show what he could do.

After about five minutes Ebisu called a halt to the exercise. He was not pleased. Naruto attacked with boundless energy and was good at improvising attacks and coming up with surprise moves. He had managed to slide past a block and land a single hit by turning an attack into a feint and bringing a leg up for a surprise kick. Unfortunately those were the only positives. His basic forms were all sloppy and poorly executed. He tried to make up for his lack of form with sheer energy, but that could only go so far. Though only competent in taijutsu he'd had no difficulty blocking everything Naruto could throw at him. His only success had come thanks to a surprising off the cuff maneuver.

The fact was Naruto was very weak in the basics of hand to hand. He would have considered his performance poor for a fourth year academy student. For someone about to try and make Chunin?

"Naruto," Ebisu asked. "Have you been working on your taijutsu at all in the last six months?"

Naruto looked hurt. "Of course I have! I train on my own every night and I've had a bunch of spars with Sasuke-teme."

Ebisu nodded. "And let me guess, Sasuke beats you every time doesn't he?"

"He just gets lucky!" Naruto shouted.

"No Naruto, it would be because his taijutsu is sharp and controlled whereas yours is slack and in desperate need of work." He eyed the boy speculatively. "Let me guess, Kakashi has never taken any time to work with you on your fighting style has he?"

The embarrassed way Naruto looked down was all the answer he needed. The more he worked with Naruto the more convinced Ebisu became that while Kakashi was a legendary assassin and fighter he knew nothing about being a teacher.

"All right Naruto, all this means is we'll have to work to improve your taijutsu. I'm no specialist but with your energy we can definitely have you looking better in no time. And since you know the Kage Bushin that will help with teaching you quickly."

Naruto looked back up at him. "What do you mean? What do shadow clones have to do with learning taijutsu?"

Ebisu looked at him. "Well haven't you noticed that when a clone is dispersed that you learn everything the clone knew?"

Naruto shook his head. "Nope."

"The technique was originally developed to aid in scouting missions in especially dangerous situations. It would allow a ninja to go into hostile territory and even if he was, 'killed' he could gain valuable information. This aspect of retaining information also makes it perfect for training."

"Then why haven't we been using it this whole time?"

"Well, it's easier for me as a teacher to show you new concepts one to one. Right now I'm trying to perfect everything I've shown you so far. At the end of the month I probably will just have you use your Kage Bushins to practice everything. There is also one negative side effect to using shadow clones, along with receiving their knowledge you also get their exhaustion. I didn't want to push you too far past your limits." He again looked at Naruto specutively. "How many shadow clones can you make safely at one time?"

Naruto shrugged. "A couple hundred."

Ebisu's eyebrows leapt at the answer. The technique divided the user's chakra evenly throughout the clones. For Naruto to be able to divide his chakra that far was certainly impressive. "Well why don't we begin with fifty and see how that goes."

"All right," Naruto ran through some hand signs. "**Kage Bushin no Jutsu.**" Naruto let out a grunt as the area around him was filled with smoke. When the smoke lifted there were twenty clones.

Ebisu counted them and frowned. "I asked for fifty, was there a problem?"

Naruto looked frustrated and angry with himself. "I'm sorry sensei, I tried to make fifty but this was all I could manage."

"I see, Naruto, as your teacher when I ask you what you can do I want you to give me an honest answer. Please don't feel that you have to lie about your abilities to impress me. Twenty is about my limit as well so this is quite good."

"But I'm not lying!" Naruto shouted. "I really can make a couple hundred easy!" He frowned. "Well I used to before that snake guy messed with me."

The mention of snake immediately drew Ebisu's attention. He had of course learned of Orochimaru's recent return and interest in Sasuke. There had however been no mention that he had an interest in Naruto as well. "By snake guy do you mean Orochimaru?"

Naruto slowly nodded. "Yeah, I think that's what Sakura said his name was. He did something to me and my chakra has been off ever since."

Ebisu was worried. He did not like the idea of Orochimaru trying to affect the chakra Naruto held. "What did he do exactly?"

"Well I have a seal on my stomach because of, well you know..." Ebisu nodded. "He touched me there and I blacked out. Ever since I haven't been able to draw as much chakra as I used to."

Ebisu nodded nervously. "I see. Naruto dismiss your clones, we're going to the tower right now."

"What? But what about my training?"

"Training can wait Naruto, anything involving your seal is much more important."

Ebisu was no seal master, but fortunately one happened to be available.

"Who is the weirdo?" Naruto asked.

"What?!" an offended Jiraiya shouted. "Do you have any idea who you're talking to kid?"

"If I did I wouldn't be asking who you are." Naruto was feeling cross. He wanted to be training, not stuck in a little room with the old man, the closet pervert, and this weirdo with the white hair and red eye make up.

"Well I'll have you know that I am Jiraiya one of the legendary Sanin, the all knowing Toad Sage, a ninja of awesome renown, a lady's man without equal, a..."

"He is my former student and he will be taking a look at your seal Naruto." The Hokage cut in.

Jiraiya gave his old teacher a frown for not letting him reveal his true greatness. He looked back at Naruto. "Ok kid, take off your jacket and shirt, I need to take a look at your seal."

Naruto looked at him suspiciously. "You're not a pedophile are you?"

" WHAT?!"

After finally calming down an irate Jiraiya and convincing Naruto to take off his jacket and shirt they were finally able to look at his belly.

"A five point seal over an eight point seal." Jiraiya shook his head. "Sloppy, definitely the work of Orochimaru's. He never did have much talent for seals. I can see why you've had trouble accessing chakra."

"Can it be repaired?" The Hokage asked.

Jiraiya grinned. "It sure can. Naruto put your arms up for a second."

"Why?"

"Naruto, please do as Lord Jiraiya asks." Ebisu said.

"Fine," Naruto put his hands up in the air.

Jiraiya jabbed five fingers into Naruto's stomach. " **Five Prong Seal Release.**"

"Ow!" Naruto doubled up in pain and glared at the spiky haired old guy. "That hurt!"

"Sorry," Jiraiya said innocently. *That's what you get for calling me a pedophile.* "But now that the restraining seal has been removed you should be able to access the same amount of chakra as before."

Naruto quickly got his shirt and orange top back on. "Does this mean I can get back to training now?"

"Actually if you wouldn't mind waiting outside I'd like to have a word with your teacher." Jiraiya said.

"Oh come on! I need to get back to training." Naruto whined.

"Please just wait outside Naruto; I am sure this will not take long." The Hokage said.

Grumbling Naruto left the room.

Jiraiya actually smiled. "The kid's got a whole lot of fire in his belly doesn't he?"

Ebisu nodded. "He is very motivated to prove himself to everyone and works tirelessly. I can honestly say I have *never* had such a dedicated student. Usually I have to spend time convincing people to put in a full effort. With him I have to convince him when it's time to stop."

Jiraiya thought fondly of another young blonde boy who never wanted to stop working.

Ebisu shook his head a bit. "It's a shame I'm forced to do so much remedial work with him."

"What do you mean?" The Hokage asked.

"Naruto has not even received as much instruction as I would expect in an academy graduate. His taijutsu for example is completely unrefined and raw. I am having to take time just to get it to a level it should already be at. Quite honestly it's amazing to me that he has managed to get this far on sheer will and determination."

"Sounds to me like the kid has a whole lot of guts." Jiraiya said. A thoughtful look crossed his face. "He sounds really interesting, almost makes me want to take a closer look at him."

Ebisu looked worried. "You're not going to steal him away from me are you?"

"Oh no, no, no I'm done taking on students, that part of my career is in the past." Jiraiya confirmed.

"Would you object if Jiraiya did want to take over his instruction?" The Hokage asked curiously. Ebisu paused and seemed embarrassed. "Please tell me what you honestly think."

"Hokage-sama, if Lord Jiraiya wanted to teach Naruto I would of course agree. However, I can't deny I am very eager to see just how far Naruto can go under my instruction. If I could help him become Chunin I would consider it my proudest moment as an instructor."

"I see," the Hokage was very happy to hear that. It pleased him to know Naruto was being instructed by someone eager to see him succeed. "Well I am sure you are keen to return to training."

Ebisu nodded. "Thank you Hokage-sama," he turned a bit. "Thank you Lord Jiraiya." He then left.

Sarutobi looked at his student and could guess what he was thinking. "Does Naruto remind you of anyone?"

Jiraiya slowly nodded. "Minato had better manners, but I've got to admit they were both eager and loud and had the guts to take on anything."

Sarutobi smiled. "Do you know what Naruto's dream is?"

"No, what?"

"He wants my job someday."

Jiraiya looked over at his teacher. "Does he now? Well isn't that interesting."

As soon as they returned to training ground 14 Ebisu realized something quite surprising. The restraining seal Orochimaru had used had acted as a training tool. By forcing Naruto to work with lesser amounts of chakra it had allowed him to gain a degree of chakra control he had never had before. Now that the seal was removed Naruto had access to a vast pool of chakra while *retaining* the chakra control that he'd developed. This combination of control and huge reserves opened up new possibilities.

Ebisu had a very specific idea on just how Naruto could take advantage of this.

"All right Naruto it's time to go."

Naruto and about fifty weary clones looked up at him. "Can't we keep training just a little longer?" He had spent the entire day learning taijutsu stances and moves and then practicing them using clones. He had literally spent the entire day beating himself up.

"It's already well past seven Naruto. You need to get some rest for tomorrow and I need to do some research for your training."

Naruto complained awhile longer but finally dismissed his clones and left with his sensei.

Jiraiya leapt down from one of the nearby trees. He'd been hidden away there for the last few hours watching Naruto struggle and fight

to improve. He had a smile on his face as he left to go do some research.

The last day

Author's Note: For any of you who may be interested I have started posting a fantasy story on Fiction press dot com. It is listed in the fantasy section and the title is The Girl with the Red Eyes . The address for it is [www dot fictionpress dot com /s/2520841/1/](http://www.fictionpress.com/s/2520841/1/) The story has nothing to do with Naruto or any other anime and is totally original.

Twenty days had passed. Ebisu had spent the last five working on getting Naruto's taijutsu to a respectable level. He dearly wished it had not been necessary as it took time away from other things. But as he had told Naruto, the foundations had to be firm before you could build on them. And he had an idea.

On the morning of the twenty first day he let Naruto know just what he had in mind.

"All right Naruto, so far we have greatly improved your chakra control, you have learned a pair of wind jutsus, and you have greatly improved your taijutsu."

Naruto gave him a big smile. He loved hearing praise. "Yeah I am pretty awesome. So what are you going to teach me next closet pervert?"

Ebisu frowned. "Naruto I have told you before to stop calling me that."

"Can't."

Ebisu quirked an eyebrow. "And why can't you?"

"Because that's what you are and I call 'em like I see 'em. If you want me to stop calling you that stop being a perv."

"How rude," Ebisu shook his head. "Well never mind. Now, what I wanted to let you know is that I only have one more new technique to teach you. Once you have learned it we will spend the remainder of our time perfecting what I have taught you."

"What?" Naruto sounded more than a little upset. "You're only going to teach me one more thing?"

Ebisu shook his head. "Naruto have you any idea how long it takes most ninja to even acquire one jutsu? Despite what it might seem you have done extremely well. The jutsus I taught you are an A-rank and a B-rank and you learned each in less than a week, that is nothing short of spectacular."

"Then teach me more jutsus! I promise I'll learn them!" Naruto pleaded.

Ebisu shook his head. "I'm sorry Naruto but there just isn't enough time now. The technique I'm about to show you will likely take awhile for you to get down. There simply won't be enough time after that for me to show you anything else and have it ready in time for the finals."

"Well show something anyway! If you teach me another jutsu I promise I'll work on it on my own after I make Chunin."

Ebisu grinned. Well no one could ever say the boy lacked confidence. A thought occurred to the teacher and the grin became a smile. "All right Naruto there is one more jutsu I can teach you. *If* you can get this technique down to my satisfaction I will teach it to you on our last day together. You won't be able to perfect it in time for the exams but it should be helpful to you in the field." Naruto began bouncing up and down. " **However**," Ebisu said sharply. "There are two conditions to my teaching it to you."

"What? Tell me."

"First, this jutsu is **lethal** there is really no way to safely use it without risking the life of your opponent. Therefore, even if you should feel you have learned it you are not allowed to use it in the finals. And you are forbidden to ever use it against a fellow leaf nin."

Naruto nodded his head seriously. "Got it, it's for enemies only. I won't ever use it on anyone from the village." He paused to think about it. "Well unless they're a traitor or something like that."

Ebisu nodded. "All right and the second condition, if I teach it to you, you promise to never call me a pervert or anything like that again."

Naruto stared at him. "Is this a bribe?"

"Yes."

Naruto began to laugh. "All right *Ebisu-sensei*, it's a deal. So what are you going to teach me now?"

"I'll demonstrate, wait right here." As Naruto stood there Ebisu slowly walked away until he was about a hundred yards. "I want you to watch me closely."

"Ok," Naruto called back. He was curious as to what Ebisu could possibly want to show him from so far away. He certainly wouldn't be able to make out any hand signs. Then as he was watching Ebisu just suddenly seemed to disappear.

"Still watching?" Ebisu's voice spoke from directly behind him.

Naruto jumped around to see his sensei standing there with a smug smile on his face.

"How did you do that?!" Naruto exclaimed. "Was that a jutsu?"

Ebisu shook his head. "No, that was a ninja technique commonly referred to as, 'forcing.' It was originally developed by the Sanin Lady Tsunade. What it basically does is allow you to focus your chakra into a certain point in your body making it far more powerful than

normal. She had such superb chakra control she could actually shatter boulders just by focusing chakra into her fist."

"Shatter boulders?" Naruto sounded excited.

"You won't be able to do that." Ebisu pointed out.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"To be able to focus your chakra tightly enough to do something like that takes extraordinary control. My own chakra control is excellent, much better than yours Naruto, but I could never do it. It's pretty unlikely that you would ever be able to."

"Then what's the point of showing me something you don't think I can use?"

Ebisu grinned. "I don't think your chakra control will ever be strong enough to turn part of your body into a weapon. *But* given your current level of control and the huge reserves you have you should be able to do other things, such as work your legs and arms at great speeds."

Naruto's eyes widened. "That's what you did! That speed reminded me of Lee and Guy-sensei."

Ebisu nodded. "You could get the same effect with months or years of intensive physical training. What Guy can do is actually superior to this since he doesn't have to use any chakra. But since you don't have that kind of time to devote solely to physical training you can use forcing to achieve the same effect. Now normally most ninja would avoid this technique except in an emergency."

"Why?"

"Because it burns through your chakra very quickly, most would just think the price of using it too high. But given how huge your reserves are it would make sense for you. Also it will act as a force multiplier."

Naruto looked lost. "Huh?"

Ebisu sighed. "What I mean is this technique will make your other abilities more powerful. Your taijutsu will be far more effective with the added speed. Your shadow clones will become far greater weapons. This ability combined with the amount of chakra you have will make you far more effective on the battlefield."

Naruto imagined a hundred shadow clones all moving too fast for the eye to follow. He recalled how Lee had clobbered precious old Sasuke before the exams.

It doesn't matter what your eye can see if your body is too weak to act.

He recalled Lee saying those words as he was kicking Sasuke's butt. Naruto began to shiver with excitement at the thought of facing Sasuke with that same sort of speed. *I am so going to kick the Uchiha's butt!*

Naruto began jumping up and down. "Hurry up and teach me this!"

With a chuckle Ebisu began doing just that.

The last day of training arrived.

Hinata stood exhausted before her father. For the last thirty days she had pushed herself to learn the techniques her father had shown her. Except for her times with Naruto she had devoted herself totally to her training.

Hiashi looked at his daughter, and the tiniest of grins appeared on his lips. "You have done very well Hinata. I expect you to do equally well tomorrow."

She stood up straight and looked her father in the eye. "I promise to do my very best."

He nodded. "Your training is now complete Hinata, get some rest and be ready for tomorrow. The finals will be very challenging." He turned to go and halted. "Hinata?"

"Yes father?"

His slight grin expanded just a fraction. "I am proud of you." With that he quickly left the family dojo.

Hinata stood there in shock for a moment, and then finally smiled.

"We are done now Naruto. I have taught you all that I could in the time we had. I hope it is enough."

A sweaty and dirty Naruto nodded his head gratefully. "Thanks Ebisu-sensei, for everything." He looked down a bit embarrassed. "You know I wasn't really thrilled when Kakashi dumped me. But I'm glad now. You've really taught me a whole lot and I'm thankful."

"You are very welcome Naruto. I am very glad I got this chance to get to know the real you. And... and I want to apologize to you for my earlier behavior." He gave the boy a deep bow. "I am sorry for the way I first treated you Naruto."

Naruto blushed. It felt weird to get acceptance from someone who had glared at him not too long ago. It felt weird but good. "It's all right." He mumbled.

Ebisu grinned. "You know Naruto I have had a great many students but you, far and away, are the best."

If it was possible his blush was getting darker. "You're just saying that to be nice. I know I'm not much of a student like Sakura or teme. I was dead last for a reason you know."

"I believe that if your teachers had not been biased towards you then you would have excelled. Naruto, don't underestimate just how much

you have learned in the past month's time. And don't think so little about your ability to learn. As time passes you will learn more and more and your skills will only increase. I have no doubt at all that you will become a great ninja."

Naruto's usual exuberance was completely vanished as he looked up shyly at his teacher.

"Do you really believe that Ebisu-sensei?"

"I do."

"Thank you, not many people really believe in me. Hearing that... thank you." Naruto didn't seem to have anything more to say.

"You're very welcome Naruto. I look forward to cheering you on tomorrow." He smiled. "I'm also betting on you pretty heavily so I expect to make a lot of cash."

That brought a smile to Naruto's face and he began to scratch the back of his head. "I won't let you down Ebisu-sensei."

"Now since I won't be teaching you anymore I've decided to give you a small gift."

"Are you buying me ramen?" He asked excitedly

"I thought you were meeting with Hinata tonight?"

"I am but you could pay for it."

Ebisu shook his head. "A man should pay for his own dates Naruto." He took out a scroll and handed it to the young boy. "Here, I know you'll put it to good use."

"Is this a jutsu scroll?" Naruto took it and held on to it like it was made of pure gold.

"Actually I made it especially for you, there are eight jutsus written on it. I am sure they'll all be of great use to you. Once you've learned them come find me and I'll give you another one. And I hope that if you should need me at any time in the future you will come see me. I will be happy to help you in any way I can."

That was when Ebisu was ambushed.

"THANK YOU SENSEI!!" Naruto leapt up and glomped on to him.

Ebisu quickly looked around; fearful people would see a twelve year old boy attached to his chest.

"Uhm, yes, that's good, you're very welcome, ah, well," Ebisu tried patting the boy's head but he continued holding on. "Don't you need to get ready for Hinata?"

"Oh that's right!" Naruto finally let go. "I need to get going. Bye sensei!"

Ebisu let out a relieved sigh that no one had seen that.

In a nearby tree Jiraiya was scribbling in his notebook. That would make a great scene for his next book. He had already decided it would be about an introverted young woman who was a teacher of the ninja arts and a closet pervert.

He would call the character Ebisa.

Five minutes

Time, there is so much of it and yet so little. And often just a few minutes can make all the difference between success and ruin.

Just five minutes can change everything.

"Isn't it cool Hinata-chan?" Naruto was showing off his new scroll proudly. "Ebisu-sensei gave this to me as a gift! And he says that after I learn all the jutsus on it he'll give me another one! I mean this is so cool! The only people who ever gave me anything before were the old man and Iruka-sensei."

Hinata had to suppress a giggle at the way he was bouncing up and down on his stool. He was so excited that most of his ramen was still sitting in his bowl. "I agree Naruto-kun, it's a wonderful gift. Ebisu must think very highly of you."

He began to rub the back of his head with a pleased smile. "Well yeah, he said I was his best student ever." Naruto puffed out his chest. "I mean not that there could be any doubt."

She put a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. "Of course not Naruto-kun."

He slipped the scroll into one of the deep pockets on his leather jacket and he looked a bit more seriously. "Are you ready for tomorrow Hinata-chan?"

Being reminded of what was only hours away now she nodded. "I think so Naruto-kun. I still don't want to have to fight you, but I'm going to do my best." She began to press her fingers together nervously. "I can't tell you specifically what I learned. But I will show you some new techniques."

Naruto nodded. "So have I."

The conversation sort of petered out as neither of them could reveal what they had learned. Naruto was also feeling a little weird that it was Hinata he would have to fight tomorrow.

"Hinata-chan," he said quietly. "Whatever happens tomorrow my feelings for you aren't going to change."

She slowly nodded. "Mine won't either Naruto-kun."

"Why did it have to be you? Why couldn't I be fighting Sasuke?"

"It was just the luck of the draw."

Thinking about Sasuke further soured his mood. "I wonder how teme will do against Gaara."

"You sound worried Naruto-kun."

He immediately shook his head to deny it. "Me worried? And about Sasuke? I am sure he will do fine."

"Naruto? Hinata?"

The two of them turned around to see Shikamaru entering the ramen stand.

"Hey Shika." Naruto greeted.

"Hello Shikamaru," Hinata said. "How has your training gone?"

Shikamaru frowned. "It's been troublesome of course. My dad and Asuma ganged up on me and they made me train three or four hours a day."

Naruto and Hinata both stared at him.

Seeing that Shikamaru nodded. "I know, it was brutal."

"Three or four hours?!" Naruto yelled at him. "I worked twelve hour days and I would have worked more except my sensei made me stop."

Shikamaru stuck a finger in his ear. "Geez Naruto do you have to be so loud?"

"Shikamaru this is our big chance to show everyone what we can do! Don't you want to do your very best to impress people?" Naruto demanded.

"Not really, the truth is the only reason I worked out as much as I did was because Asuma threatened to leave me partnered with Ino for training and missions." He shivered at the thought.

Naruto shook his head. "Don't you at least want to get promoted?"

"Not really, who wants the responsibility of being Chunin." Shikamaru eyed the two of them. "Well since I've never seen Hinata in a dress or you in anything but that ugly orange jumpsuit I'm guessing the two of you are on a date."

Hinata blushed a bit while Naruto glowered. "What's wrong with my jumpsuit?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "I could tell you but I don't have that sort of time. I'm actually on my way to the hospital to see Chouji."

Both Naruto and Hinata were surprised to hear that. "I didn't know Chouji was hurt." Hinata said.

"Is this from his match at the preliminaries? I didn't think it was that serious." Naruto said.

"Nah, this has nothing to do with that. Asuma promised to take Chouji to get all you can eat barbecue if he actually fought his match. Asuma finally got around to taking us out yesterday. After twenty

plates of food Chouji had to be brought to the hospital with a severe case of indigestion."

Naruto got the sudden mental image of a pair of medic nins struggling to carry him out of the restaurant on a stretcher as Chouji complained that he wanted more beef. Naruto clutched his sides and began howling with laughter.

"Naruto-kun! That is not nice!" Hinata chided.

He slowly got his laughter under control as he wiped a tear from his eye. "Sorry, Hinata-chan, sorry."

"Can we come with you Shikamaru?" Hinata asked.

"Sure why not, I'm sure Chouji would like that."

"Hey, while we're there we can visit fuzzy brows too."

Naruto quickly finished his bowl and the three of them headed to the hospital.

As luck would have it when they arrived in Chouji's room Ino was already there talking to her teammate.

"Why don't we go see Lee first?" Shikamaru suggested. "Ino will be talking for awhile."

"Sure," Naruto said. Hinata nodded her consent.

They went down the hall to Lee's room and opened the door.

Blood.

There was blood.

It was on the walls, the floor, the window, and the ceiling. It was splattered all around the room.

The bed sheets were soaked with it.

Lying crumpled on the floor facing them was Lee. His eyes were wide open and looking at them lifelessly.

Standing calmly nearby was Gaara of the desert. He too was looking at them, his eyes calm and unfeeling. Sand danced around at his feet, jumping and squirming as though alive. "Have you come to prove my existence?" He whispered.

The three of them were frozen for an instant. Too horrified, too shocked at the scene before them to do anything but stare. Then Hinata began screaming.

The two boys beside her snapped into action.

" **Shadow Possession Technique.**" Shikamaru quickly ran through his hand signs and his shadow reached out to merge with Gaara's. The moment it did so his sand fell to the floor inert.

"Bastard!" Naruto screamed and leapt in punching Gaara in the face.

Shikamaru backed up as though he'd been struck. "Naruto knock it off! Anything you do to him I feel through my jutsu. We need to call in the ANBU right now!"

Hinata was still screaming and staring at Lee's body. Naruto wrapped his arms around her and buried her face into his chest so she wouldn't have to look anymore. Naruto glared hatefully at the red head who was still standing there calm and disinterested.

"Why the hell did you do this you murdering bastard?!" Naruto shouted.

"Calm down Naruto, he's still dangerous." Shikamaru did not mention he could only hold him for a maximum of five minutes. But in his head the clock was ticking. "Naruto get Hinata out of here and contact the ANBU, let them know what happened." Shikamaru

focused on Gaara, his calm demeanor while standing in the middle of all that blood was disturbing. "Naruto asked you a question, why did you do this? Did you have some kind of vendetta against Lee?"

"No, nothing like that." Gaara answered unruffled. "I just felt like it."

"You felt like it?" Shikamaru repeated with a hollow tone. "That's it?"

"You murdering, heartless bastard," Naruto growled as he continued to hold Hinata close. "He was a friend of mine!"

Gaara's eyes glanced at Naruto and dismissed him. "So what? All other people are nothing to me. My own existence is all that matters." He glanced back at Shikamaru. "I'm bored now, let me go or I'll kill you all."

"You've got to be kidding." Shikamaru shot back. "You just murdered a defenseless leaf nin and you think I'll let you go? You'll be executed for this."

And as if on cue...

"Yosh, what is this screaming? What..." Maito Guy came to an abrupt halt at the doorway. " **Lee!!** "

And with that all hell broke loose.

Naruto couldn't see what happened. One second Guy-sensei was standing beside him, the next he was gone. One second Gaara was standing in the middle of the hospital room, the next there was a bone snapping crunch and he was flying through the wall. Shikamaru let out a shout of pain and was on the floor unconscious. From down the hall Ino and a couple of nurses were running towards them. From outside he could hear yelling.

Through all this he kept a firm hold of Hinata. He looked at the girl that was still crying and shaking. He held her a little tighter and whispered to her that it was all right. In the middle of this sudden

madness she was the important thing. He would always protect her and keep her safe, even when the world around them went insane.

Gaara realized he was in trouble when he saw and tasted the blood coming out of his mouth. Being driven out of a second story hospital room didn't worry him, the sand cushioned his landing and it happened too fast to worry about anyway. But as he stood up he looked at the blood and felt the pain of a broken jaw. His sand armor had saved his life but he was wounded and bleeding. He loved the sight of blood, seeing it always made him feel certain about his own existence. It confirmed that he had a right to exist. And it made mother happy too.

But seeing his own blood was a different matter. He would have screamed but all he could manage was a gurgle. With his jaw broken he could no longer talk.

"Why?!" Guy landed ten feet in front of him, his killer intent so powerful that even Gaara was noticing it. The civilians who had been in the street or coming in or out of the hospital were running away shouting. "Why did you kill my precious student?!" Before he killed the boy he wanted to know. Guy was opening up the gates and letting the power flow into him. His skin turned red and the sheer volume of chakra became visible all around his body. Very few had ever seen the easy going Maito Guy really, truly angry. Those that had rarely survived the experience.

And Guy was angry now.

If Gaara could have spoken he would have screamed that his existence would not end. Since he couldn't do that he instead sent all of his sand forward to catch and kill the ninja who had hurt him. But just as soon as the sand began to move Guy disappeared and Gaara could feel a hundred punches slamming into his body. He was sent flying into the wall of a shop, through it, and out the wall on the other side. Before he could even land in the street he felt a kick send him rocketing into the air above Konoha. Helpless, he could feel as

his gourd was ripped off his back and thrown away. A rain of brutal punches seemed to fall on him from all directions, each one scraping away some of his sand armor. This was like his match against Lee only a dozen times worse.

Guy opened seven of the eight gates. He wanted every scrap of power he could get his hands on in order to avenge his precious protégé. He would have gladly opened the last gate, but he had to live. As Lee's sensei it was his responsibility to apologize to Lee's parents for failing to protect their son. He had watched Lee's match and understood just how dangerous Gaara was... so long as he had access to sand.

He had gotten him into the air away from the bulk of his sand. He had gotten rid of the gourd that he knew Gaara could convert to sand. Now he was quickly stripping off that sand that Gaara was using as armor. When it was gone...

Gaara was a poor ninja and not a very good fighter. Given his track record of having survived dozens of fights and assassination attempts without a scratch that would seem impossible. But the fact was Gaara had always relied on his innate ability with sand to both protect and attack for him. He had never felt the need to consider strategy. Until his match with Lee no enemy had ever broken through his defenses. As such he had stopped feeling any fear when he fought. And because he was not used to fighting while aware he could be hurt or killed that left him a tendency to panic whenever he got into real danger.

The moment Guy opened the gates Gaara was no match for him even with his sand. Lee had pushed him and Guy was a far more powerful and experienced foe. Gaara's only hope from that point on had been to fully transform into Shukaku. Nothing less, not even a partial transformation, would have been enough to save him. But facing Guy's ferocious assault Gaara was too panicked to think logically. Inside he was screaming in mindless terror.

The last of the sand was gone and his enemy was now helpless. Guy had deliberately tossed Gaara to the space above training ground twenty nine. It was a special training area for mountain fighting. It was completely bare of any sand or dirt, the entire training area was granite.

"Now you will pay for what you have done!" His bandages wrapped around Gaara and together he drove them down towards the earth with terrifying speed. " **Reverse Lotus.**"

At the last instant Guy leapt away. Gaara slammed into the rock hard ground with explosive force sending up a huge cloud of dust and debris.

When the dust finally settled Guy stood at the lip of a thirty foot deep crater. He was looking down at the broken shattered body of his student's killer.

He had done it, he had avenged Lee.

Gaara was dead.

Plans and counter plans

"What exactly is going on?" The Hokage demanded.

His assistants looked at one another embarrassed. "All we know is that there is some sort of fighting going on near Konoha hospital. ANBU have been dispatched to the scene."

That had been true ten minutes ago and he still knew nothing more. Sarutobi bit down on his pipe and reminded himself not to take his frustration out on his assistants. He looked back out his office window down on the village. Could this have something to do with Orochimaru? Could this be a precursor to an actual full scale attack? Many possibilities ran through his mind. What he needed was information.

An ANBU in a raccoon mask entered his office. "Hokage-sama I have a report."

He turned to the man. "Let's hear it."

"Hokage-sama, a murder was committed in the hospital. The Genin, Rock Lee was the victim."

Everyone in the room began whispering, including not only his assistants his advisors Koharu and Homaru who were also present. Following the attempt on Sasuke this was the second attack on a ninja in the hospital. Sarutobi wondered if the two could somehow be related.

"Please continue, do we know who the killer was?"

The ANBU nodded. "We have statements from three reliable witnesses. They all agree that it was Sabaku no Gaara."

There were gasps all around at the news. "The Kazekage's son murdered one of our ninja?!" Koharu said in stunned disbelief.

"Who are the witnesses?" Homaru asked.

"Uzumaki Naruto, Nara Shikamaru, and Hyuga Hinata."

Homaru and Koharu looked at one another unhappily. Had it only been Naruto there might have been room for doubt. But they could not question the word of the heirs to the Nara and Hyuga clan.

"Did the three of them attack Gaara? Is that the fighting that was reported?"

"No Hokage-sama, Gaara was attacked by Maito Guy."

"Guy? Lee's sensei?" Sarutobi asked.

"Hai, he was in the hospital and upon seeing what had happened he instantly attacked Gaara."

"Well I certainly cannot blame him for that. So what happened?"

"Hokage-sama the fight ended at training ground twenty nine. There we found the body of Gaara as well as an incapacitated Guy. Apparently he opened a number of the inner gates during their battle and his body has gone into shock as a result. He has been transported to Konoha Hospital where he is currently in surgery and in critical condition. The medic nins are not certain he will survive."

"I see." Sarutobi took a long puff on his pipe as he considered everything he had just been told. "I will have to inform the Kazekage of this immediately, please send a message to him asking him to meet me here."

The Kazekage approached the tower with his two, 'bodyguards' seemingly serene and unconcerned. But underneath the man was actually very worried. The sudden summons to the tower had caught him completely off guard. Did Sarutobi-sensei know? It was possible. Whatever his feelings towards the man he was willing to

acknowledge that Sarutobi had been called the, 'Professor' for a reason. There was a very real chance he was walking into a trap. But if the summons was genuine he could not refuse without insulting the man and raising suspicions. So he had decided to answer the summons and take the risk. *Well, I have to admit the danger makes the game more interesting.*

As they approached the entrance he whispered just loud enough for his two servants to hear. "Do nothing unless I command it, no matter what you see or hear." Both of them gave the barest of nods.

Alone in the Hokage's office the two men faced each other for the first time in more than fifteen years. Though only one of them knew that.

"Well Hokage-sama, for what reason have you asked me to come here?"

"It involves your son Gaara," the Hokage spoke carefully.

The Kazekage lifted a single eyebrow. "I presume he is in some sort of trouble."

"Kazekage-sama, I am afraid I must inform you that Gaara committed murder against the ninja Rock Lee. As I am sure you are aware both murder and attacking a ninja of the leaf are capital crimes within this village. Gaara has been executed according to the law." That was technically true, though Guy had not been acting as a law enforcement agent at the time.

"How are we to deal with this?" Koharu asked.

"Gaara committed a pair of capital offenses," Sarutobi said calmly. "For both committing murder and attacking a leaf ninja he would have been executed no matter whose son he was."

"Even if his death was warranted he was still the Kazekage's son. Whatever the justification this could lead to war or at the very least the canceling of our alliance." Koharu said.

"Perhaps," Homura added. "There is a way we could offer the Kazekage some compensation for this tragedy, something to appease his anger."

Sarutobi frowned. "What do you suggest?"

"If Guy lives he should be handed over to Suna to face trial. Perhaps that would satisfy the Kazekage and avoid a greater tragedy."

Koharu slowly nodded. "That might at least help the situation."

"You wish me to hand over one of our most respected and honored ninja to face trial for avenging his student's murder?" The Hokage asked.

"I admit that it is not the most honorable alternative." Homura stated. "But is it not worth any sacrifice to avoid a possible war?"

"In a way Maito Guy would be sacrificing himself for the sake of the village." Koharu pointed out.

"No," Sarutobi said flatly. "Guy's actions were fully in accordance with the law, and I refuse to sacrifice him for no better reason than it is expedient. Sacrifices must be made for the good of the village, but I will not sacrifice a man who acted honorably in the defense of his student. I shall inform the Kazekage that his son was executed due to his crimes."

"But..." Koharu tried to argue.

"I have made my decision." Sarutobi repeated firmly.

The shock in the Kazekage's eyes was not feigned. Even with a veil covering most of his face it was obvious to Sarutobi the man was completely taken by surprise.

"You are saying that my son Gaara is dead?" The Kazekage asked sounding stunned.

Sarutobi nodded slightly. "Please accept my condolences and understand that this act was unavoidable the moment he committed his crime. I pray that this will not damage the relations between our villages."

The Kazekage's mind was racing. With this news all his plans had been completely ruined. Gaara had been his trump card, the key to all his plans to destroy Konoha. Now the little fool had gotten himself killed. He needed a moment to think. He leaned back in his seat and steepled his fingers. Sarutobi watched his reaction nervously from behind his desk.

It was much too late to call off the attack. All the forces had been brought to the vicinity of Konoha undetected. There was no guarantee that such a thing could be done again. He had waited too long for his revenge, and with the attack now less than twenty four hours away he was determined to go through with it whatever else might come.

He thought he saw a way to at least partially make up for the loss of Shukaku's power. But that would require him to radically alter his own role in the attack. He stared hard at Sarutobi-sensei. *Well now, which is more important to me? Killing you or destroying this village?* He found it a difficult choice as he wanted both badly. Ultimately he decided that he should concentrate on destroying the village. Afterall, if he was leading the attack the old fool would likely try to confront him. Then he would get to enjoy both his personal revenge and his revenge on his home.

Ku, ku, ku what an interesting twist. It will make things more difficult but I will still find a way to destroy Konoha. Now then, how would a father react to the death of a son he hated?

"Whatever his actions Gaara should have stood trial for them. Not only as my son but as a participant of these exams he should have been protected. I therefore demand that you hand over his killer to me to stand trial for murder." The Kazekage held some slight anger in his voice.

The reaction was about what he'd expected, though perhaps a bit cold blooded. Sarutobi sadly shook his head. "I refuse to do so. From our point of view no crime was committed. Therefore I cannot in good conscience give him to you."

"Is that your final word on the matter?" The Kazekage asked.

"It is."

"Very well," the Kazekage rose from his seat. "In protest over my son's cruel murder my entourage and I shall immediately leave this village. I will not attend tomorrow's finals. I shall not start a war over this matter or even end the alliance. But be aware that my demand for my son's killer remains and I shall not be satisfied until he is handed over to me."

With that the Kazekage departed.

Sarutobi sat in his office for awhile replaying the conversation again and again in his mind. He had at least managed to avoid the worst case scenario. The actual result was bad but could have been far worse. But something about the Kazekage's reaction had seemed... off. He didn't really seem like a father who had lost a son. He'd had two sons and lost one. Even if he'd had issues he couldn't imagine having a son die and show so little emotion.

Sarutobi shook his head; he had to call an emergency meeting tonight.

"He's dead?" Temari stared at him, not sure how to react.

Baki nodded once. "I was informed by the Lord Kazekage, and I have gone personally to identify the body. This is no ruse, Gaara truly is dead."

The boy let out a long breath. "Thank Kami."

Temari turned on him and shouted. "Kankuro! Don't say things like that! No matter what he was still our baby brother!"

"Yeah, and he was a psychopath who was always one wrong word away from killing us both" Kankuro snapped back unapologetic. "How many times did he threaten to kill you Temari? Are you going to stand there and pretend you're not as relieved as I am?"

She looked down ashamed. "I'm relieved," she admitted. "But he was still our brother."

"He was **never** our brother!" Kankuro snapped. "He made that pretty damn clear too. I plan on going out and celebrating."

"You will not," Baki said sharply. "You will both get a good night's sleep. You know what is coming tomorrow."

The two of them looked alert. "Wait," Temari whispered. Even in their hotel room there could be ears listening. "The operation is moving forward without Gaara?"

"It is," Baki answered. "For that is the will of the Kazekage. So both of you be prepared tomorrow."

"I have called this emergency session of the Council together to give you an update on recent events." Sarutobi informed them. He then gave them a general description of the events of the day including his discussion with the Kazekage.

"With respect Hokage-sama perhaps you should reconsider handing over Guy." Danzo informed him. "With his sacrifice it seems this

incident would be completely resolved."

"How the hell can you do that when he was avenging his student?" Tsume demanded. Being an Inuzuka it was not surprising that she had the strongest sense of loyalty of anyone present. "What the hell would that say to our ninja? 'Even if you are honorable and the cause just we will still betray you?'"

"Sacrifices are sometimes necessary for the greater good, every ninja knows this." Danzo intoned.

"Yeah," Shikaku agreed. "But are you really going to sacrifice him when all he did was execute a murderer?"

"That would be a disgusting betrayal on our part." Chouza supported his friend and teammate.

"Perhaps," Koharu said. "But isn't it better to sacrifice one man if it prevents a war?"

"What if you sacrifice him and it doesn't?" Inoichi asked. "We would lose one of our best ninja for nothing and you would also be showing everyone how little we value honor and loyalty."

"Guy will not be sacrificed." Sarutobi said. "I have already made my decision."

"How is Guy doing?" Shikaku asked.

"He survived the surgery but will likely be incapacitated for some months." Sarutobi said. "He opened seven of the inner gates and has suffered accordingly."

"If he will be unfit for service for so long what is to become of his students?" Hiashi asked.

Sarutobi shook his head. "That question can wait." He looked at the man standing patiently at the end of the table. "Ibiki, you have information on the murder investigations?"

The scarred head of ANBU's torture and interrogation department nodded. "On the disappearance and presumed murder of the finals participant Dosu I am afraid we have no leads. Due to the lack of a body we cannot even be sure if there was a murder. As for the death of Hayate, as I know you are all aware he had suspicions about a young Genin named Kabuto. The same Kabuto who was confronted by Kakashi during an attempt to kidnap or kill Uchiha Sasuke. It seems clear now that he was working as a double agent for Orochimaru."

"We already know all of this," Koharu pointed out. "Is there a point to bringing this up?"

"There is, following the Kazekage's departure from the village we maintained a discreet watch over him. Kabuto was observed speaking to him."

Shouts erupted from nearly everyone except the Hokage. He let the chaos reign for a bit before bringing the meeting back to order.

"It now seems certain that there is some connection between Orochimaru and Suna." Sarutobi calmly stated.

"How sure are you that they met?" Koharu demanded.

"Very," Ibiki tossed a manila folder out onto the middle of the table. It opened and spilled out a dozen pictures. All of them black and white images of a smiling Kabuto speaking to the Kazekage.

Shikaku looked at one of the pictures and pretty much summed up what the council members were all thinking.

"Now this is *really* troublesome."

Sarutobi sighed; he was getting too damn old for this. "Though we lack the specifics we must assume that *something* will take place tomorrow. It may be anything from another attempt on Sasuke to some sort of actual attack."

"Why don't we just cancel the finals?" Tsume asked.

"We have a great number of important visitors in the village who are here to witness them. If we were to cancel and then nothing were to happen we would offend a great many clients and potential clients." Koharu pointed out.

"Besides which if something is planned for the finals we are as ready to deal with it as possible." Danzo stated. "It would be better to deal with it now while we are ready then have our opponents change their plans and strike at a later time when we are less prepared."

Sarutobi nodded his agreement. "And to make certain we are prepared we will step up our patrols both within and outside the village." He looked specifically at Tsume, Inoichi, and Hiashi. "In regards to which I would like to ask for additional help from the Inuzuka, Yamanaka, and Hyuga clans."

All three clan heads immediately nodded their agreement.

"Very well then," Sarutobi said. "Let us coordinate our plans for tomorrow."

Kabuto arrived at the hidden camp where most of the Sound forces were still in hiding. He was soon surrounded by a dozen captains.

He pushed his glasses up and smiled. "I have new orders for you from Orochimaru-sama."

A bad time

Author's Notes: Just one quick thing. I do **not** hate Gaara or any other character. Yes, as a few people have pointed out I have killed Gaara in a couple of my stories. I have also killed Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura, and Hinata multiple times. If you read all my stories you will find that I have killed just about every major character at some point. (Except Shikamaru for some reason, but I'm sure I'll get to him eventually.) I don't hate Gaara or Lee or Neji or Sasuke or any of the other characters. When I kill one of the characters it's for the sake of the story. I never do it just for the sake of killing them.

Naruto was in his apartment getting ready. He was really excited about his chance to finally show everyone just what he could do. He just wished it didn't have to be against Hinata.

He and Hinata were in the hospital lobby. They had just given their statement to an ANBU about what they'd seen. Shikamaru had been unconscious for a couple minutes, but woken up no worse for wear. He had felt the impact and pain of a jaw shattering punch but no actual harm was done. The hospital was in chaos and the ANBU were not allowing anyone to leave until their investigation was complete. Until he could get her safely home he was sticking right by Hinata's side. Everything that had just happened had only driven home for him just how much Hinata meant to him. He never wanted to see her tears or hear her screams ever again.

As they sat on a small bench with people running all about them he thought he heard her say something.

He looked over to her. She was no longer shaking or crying but she did seem sort of pale and she had been really quiet since giving her statement. "Did you say something Hinata-chan?"

She could barely meet his eyes. "I'm sorry." She said miserably.

"Sorry? Sorry for what?"

"I'm sorry that I was useless back there. You and Shikamaru both took action while I was being completely useless." She looked away from him. "Maybe... maybe everyone is right, maybe I am weak."

"You're not weak!" He said that so loud a number of people stopped and looked in his direction. Naruto reached out and took both of her hands. "Hinata-chan forget what those idiots said. I've had people tell me my whole life that I was a failure. I don't care what people think! They're wrong about me and they're wrong about you. They haven't seen the real you yet, once they do they'll realize how strong you are."

She looked up at him and saw how strongly he really believed that. *He believes in me.* Knowing Naruto-kun felt that way about her was pleasing and humbling to her. "Naruto-kun how can you be so sure?" She asked. "You saw how I fell apart!" If her father had seen that he would have looked away in shame and probably put her in the cadet branch. Naruto didn't look at her with shame or embarrassment. He looked at her with a simple understanding that made her feel safe.

"This was your first time wasn't it Hinata-chan? The first time you've really seen death up close." All she could manage was a nod. "The first time is always the hardest. You're allowed to have trouble with it, especially when it's someone you know. But you'll be able to deal with it I'm sure. You're a strong person Hinata-chan, and I believe in you."

She looked at him and felt her heart flutter inside her chest and her face grow hot. How could he be so kind and understanding to someone as weak and undeserving as her? "Naruto-kun," she hesitated. "This wasn't your first time was it?"

"No it wasn't," he said quietly.

"Could you tell me about what it was like for you?"

Naruto really didn't want to talk about it. But he could see it would help her if he did.

"It was on our first C-rank mission. We were in Wave country trying to protect this bridge builder from a pair of really powerful missing nin named Zabuza and Haku."

"What happened?"

"Well there was this big battle on a bridge. Kakashi was stuck fighting Zabuza while Sasuke and I were facing Haku. Sakura was guarding the client. Sasuke and I were trapped in this dome made of ice mirrors and Haku was turning us into pin cushions throwing senbons at us. It was during that part of the fight I saw... I saw Sasuke die. He took an attack that was aimed at me and I had to watch as he died in my arms."

Hinata looked confused. "But wait! Sasuke's not dead."

"I know, it turns out that Haku's attack only put Sasuke into a death like state. But I didn't know that at the time. I was watching someone die for the very first time and it was a teammate that had just saved my life. That was... that was really hard."

Hinata nodded with sympathy. Seeing someone she knew and liked like Lee dead was terrible. But if it had been Kiba, Shino, or Kurenai-sensei it would have been much worse. "What did you do?"

"Well, when I got over the shock of seeing Sasuke's body in front of me I sort of got mad. I mean really, really, mad." He paused not liking that memory either. He remembered the very end with Zabuza lying beside Haku in death. He recalled his own shattered heart at everything that had been lost. That mission had been filled with things he would have liked to have forgotten. But he had to admit now that the experience had strengthened him and shown him what being a ninja really was. There was glory and excitement, but there

was also blood and pain and loss. All of it was a part of being ninja, he understood that now. Hinata was just learning.

"The point is Hinata-chan that I didn't deal with it the way a ninja should have. I totally lost control, and a ninja should **never** do that. Don't think just because you lost control the first time you saw a friend killed that it means you're weak. It just means you're human."

When he explained it like that... she slowly nodded. "So you really don't think I'm weak?"

"No," he answered. "I think you're human. And I would never ever want you to lose that part of yourself."

She seemed relieved by what he had said and by the time he had gotten her home (or at least within five blocks) she seemed to be all right.

Looking into the mirror he knew he was ready. Today he would show the whole village the real Uzumaki Naruto. He just wished it didn't have to be against Hinata. He stormed out of his apartment eager and ready to give everything that he had today.

The changes that Sarutobi and the Council had put into effect yesterday began having an immediate impact.

A frustrated Kabuto slipped into the village. He was not wearing an ANBU uniform. He had been hoping to ambush a solitary ANBU agent but all the patrols seemed to be running in groups of four or more. And he had noted that they were all carrying radio communicators which was a bit unusual. He was sure he could deal with four ANBU, but he wasn't convinced he could take them before a message got out. Even if he did, a four man patrol going missing would be noticed a lot faster than a single agent would be. His orders from Orochimaru-sama had been very specific, do nothing to raise alarm until just before the scheduled time.

And so he had been forced to rely on a simple henge to disguise himself. That was not good. The whole reason he had wanted to get his hands on an ANBU uniform in the first place was to avoid using one. For skilled Jonin henges were not hard to spot. All the sound agents who had infiltrated the stadium and the village were wearing civilian costumes. Kabuto realized too late that he should have just done the same. But being ANBU would have given him more license to move about unquestioned, and he'd been certain of his ability to acquire one. It was too late now to get a civilian disguise.

And sure enough, almost as soon as he had entered the stadium an ANBU in a cat mask had pointed to him and shouted for him to halt. Kabuto had no trouble escaping, but it was obvious he could not remain in a stadium full of ANBU unnoticed. Not if he was forced to rely on a henge for disguise. Unfortunately he was pressed for time. Deciding there was nothing he could do in the stadium he found a nice quiet café and sat down to have some tea. All those disguised Sound agents would be in a world of hurt without his genjutsu, but there was nothing he could do. He could not even contact Orochimaru unless he wanted to be outside the village for the attack, and if he did that he still wouldn't be in position to use his genjutsu. So he decided to do the next best thing. He would stay in the village and join in the attack then.

Looking at his watch he was he had about fifteen minutes. He ordered some chocolate cake to go with his tea. Café Miruki had the best chocolate cake.

Tsume rubbed the top of her partner's head. "You ready?"

"Of course!" Kuromaru answered. Even with his eye patch and many scars the large black dog was still always eager for action.

Tsume looked over at her daughter Hana, her son Kiba, and her two nephews who were making up this patrol along with all their accompanying dogs. "The Hokage is depending on us Inuzukas to

find any trouble that might be out there. Are we going to let the Hokage down?" She demanded.

She was answered immediately by a loud chorus of no's and barks.

"What the hell are we waiting for? Let's get going already!" An over eager Kiba shouted. He was immediately smacked in the back of his head by his mom.

"Are you pack leader now?" She demanded. An embarrassed Kiba lowered his head submissively. Laughing Tsume rubbed his head to show she wasn't angry. "All right! Let's get going!"

With shouts and barks of pure joy the Inuzukas went out looking for trouble.

The ANBU captain in the rabbit mask lifted a fist signaling a halt. Two ANBU and two Genin landed on the ground near him. The rabbit turned to one of the Genin.

"Please scout ahead for us Neji."

He nodded politely at the order. "Yes captain, **Byakugan**." He then spent a moment searching out everything within a two mile radius.

He and Tenten had been in the hospital hoping for the chance to talk to their sensei. Unfortunately Guy was still in intensive care and unable to receive visitors. It was during this time that the ANBU had informed him that he would be attached to one of their patrols the following morning. Tenten had immediately begged to be allowed to join in. Since Neji was used to working with her and trusted her he had also asked she be allowed to accompany the patrol. Neji got the sense they had agreed to make the Hyuga member happy. That had made him smirk; occasionally being a Hyuga was worth something.

He deactivated his bloodline and turned to the captain. "I see nothing unusual within a two mile radius."

The ANBU captain nodded. "All right let's get moving again."

They continued the long circuit all the way around the village.

"We appreciate your help with this." Ibiki informed him.

Inoichi shrugged. "Not a problem, my clan is always happy to help protect the village." Given their clan abilities the Yamanaka had traditionally worked closely with the ANBU. Inoichi was in fact one of the few men in the village to enjoy a friendly relationship with Ibiki. If Ibiki were a bit more honest he might have even called the man a friend.

They were on the roof of ANBU headquarters. There was an eagle in a large cage with collar attached to his neck. The collar possessed a radio communicator as well as a miniature camera.

Inoichi formed a small square with his fingers framing the eagle. "**Mind Body Switch.**"

Inoichi's body went limp and was carefully caught and put in a chair by Ibiki. One of his assistants opened the cage. The eagle hopped out and took off. The ANBU now had eyes in the sky.

Back at the stadium the stands were full and there was a nervous feeling to the crowd. All sorts of rumors were running wild and it was impossible to know what was true and what was not. People knew there had been some sort of huge battle near the hospital yesterday between a leaf nin and a foreigner. But there had been no official statements released by the Hokage. People had noticed that there were a lot more ANBU visible than normal. And anyone living near the gates could fail to notice there were a lot more patrols going out than usual. With all these unusual events going on people were more than happy to guess at their meaning. These guesses soon turned into rumor with the rumors taking on a life of their own.

There had been an assassination attempt in the hospital. No there had been a murder. The attempt / murder had led to the fight outside the hospital. The assassin had been killed. Had been captured. Had gotten away. The assassin and leaf nin had killed each other. The captured assassin was in ANBU headquarters and had confessed to a plot to kill the Hokage, to kill Sasuke, to launch a surprise attack on the stadium. The assassin had been a Suna nin, a Sound nin, an undercover agent from Rock. The Kazekage had fled the village after declaring war, had fled just ahead of pursuing ANBU, had been kidnapped by the ANBU in connection to a plot. Orochimaru had been spotted in disguise trying to enter the stadium. Orochimaru had been the assassin and was still at large. Orochimaru had kidnapped / murdered Sasuke. Orochimaru was about to lead an army to attack the village. (This was considered one of the most outrageous rumors and was one of the least believed.) All these stories and many more were circulating through the crowd. No one could tell which stories were true, false, or had some truth to them. So the crowd grew restless, their excitement tinged with fear.

Even up in the Hokage's private box it was easy to sense the mood.

"The people are nervous." Jiraiya commented.

"They have good reason to be." Sarutobi sighed. "I wish it were not necessary to keep everything secret. But I cannot let our opposition guess at how much we know."

Jiraiya chuckled. "Besides I doubt it would make them feel much better."

"True," Sarutobi agreed. There was a sudden stir and the crowd suddenly became noticeably louder. "It seems the candidates are going out onto the field."

"They sure are." Jiraiya counted the bodies and frowned. "I only count six, shouldn't there be seven?"

Sarutobi looked concerned. "The one who is missing is Sasuke. He and Kakashi have been doing some sort of special training and have been out of contact for the last two weeks."

Jiraiya looked alarmed. He knew all about Orochimaru's interest in the last Uchiha and about that damn curse seal. "You don't know where Sasuke and Kakashi are?"

"No, but I am certain they are both fine." Sarutobi hesitated. "Though I will confess I had expected to hear from them before now." With everything else that was going on the idea of Sasuke being ambushed during training was not farfetched.

"Hey Naruto," Shikamaru said. "Where the hell is that teammate of yours?"

"I don't know, I haven't seen him since the preliminaries. But he'll definitely be here." Naruto sounded very sure.

"How can you be so certain Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked.

"Trust me Hinata-chan, I know the teme. He wouldn't miss this for the world." Naruto looked around. "Speaking of missing people where is that Dosu guy and where is Hayate?"

Genma approached them holding a small box. "Dosu is no longer in the competition. I will be the proctor for the finals. Now since two competitors are no longer in the exam it has been decided to reorder the matches. Each of you take a slip of paper from the box."

Naruto and Hinata both looked at each other with the same thought running through their head.

Shikamaru muttered that it was troublesome, but otherwise no one complained. Shino did not care who he fought. Temari and Kankuro also cared nothing about how the matches turned out. So each of them approached and took a number from the box.

"Now read your numbers out to me."

"I got one." Kankuro said.

"I have the number two." Shino said.

"Three," called out Temari.

"Four," said Hinata.

"I'm five." Naruto said.

"Seven," Shikamaru mumbled through a yawn.

Genma nodded and quickly wrote the information down on a clip board. "That makes the absent Sasuke number six. All right, all of you listen up. The first match will be Kankuro versus Shino, second match Temari and Hinata; the third match will be Naruto versus Sasuke, that's if he decides to show up of course. Shikamaru will receive a first round bye and face the winner of the third match."

Shikamaru grinned. "Looks like I get to have a nice nap before I have to do anything."

"Now listen all of you," Genma instructed them. "The finals will follow the same rules and format as the preliminaries. So be aware that if I see one of you hopelessly beaten I will step in and end the match. But for your own sake don't count on me intervening, if you feel yourself to be beaten forfeit. Keep in mind that you don't necessarily have to win a match to earn promotion. All you have to do is impress the judges. Now then I want Kankuro and Shino to remain while the rest of you head up to the balcony."

"Actually," Kankuro spoke up. "I'd like to go ahead and forfeit."

Everyone but Temari looked at him in surprise. The two of them had already discussed this and agreed that Crow could not be used since all his weapons were coated in poison. The match was pointless,

Kankuro preferred to save his limited supply of ammunition for when it really mattered.

Shino's eyebrows were jumping up and down in a rare display of emotion.

Genma was sending him a dire frown. "What was that?"

Kankuro smiled. "I said I forfeit." The proctor and the leaf nins were all looking at him with varying degrees of annoyance or anger. He didn't care, in a little while they'd all be dead anyway.

With a disgusted shake of his head Genma announced the result of the first match being Shino's victory by forfeiture. Not too surprisingly the crowd let loose a long cascade of boos. Feeling rather pleased with himself Kankuro actually took a bow, which brought on louder boos.

Sarutobi looked over to his student. "Why would anyone go to all the trouble of reaching these finals only to forfeit?"

"They wouldn't," Jiraiya replied. " *If* making Chunin was their real goal. If there was something more important going on then it would make perfect sense." A lifetime as both a spy and researcher had left the Sanin the ability to see underneath the underneath with ease.

Sarutobi nodded his agreement. He took out a piece of paper and pen and scribbled down a message. He then signaled Raidou over and handed the scarred Jonin the message. "Please deliver this to Ibiki in ANBU headquarters."

"Right away Hokage-sama." Raidou immediately disappeared in a swirl of wind and leaves.

"The next scheduled match is Temari versus Hinata." He looked at the blonde kunoichi. "You planning to forfeit too?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No, I feel like fighting." She glanced at her watch. *At least for fifteen minutes.*

Genma nodded. "So good to know someone does. All right, everyone but the combatants clear the field and go to the balcony."

Before going Naruto went over to his girl and gave her a big hug. "Kick her ass Hinata-chan!"

Blushing a bit she nodded. "I'll do my best Naruto-kun, I won't hold back."

In the stands Hiashi had a clear view at the informal and intrusive way one of the other finalists had gone over and embraced his daughter.

"Who is that?" Hiashi asked out loud.

"That is Uzumaki Naruto, Hiashi-sama." One of his servants informed him.

Hiashi stared at the arena floor to where the boy was leaving with the others. *Why is that boy giving Hinata such a vulgar display of emotion? And why did Hinata allow it?* His daughter's match was about to start. He would concentrate on that for now. But he would have questions for his daughter later.

For this match Hinata was dressed in black ninja clothing. She had decided to leave her bulky jacket at home. She settled easily into her jyuken stance. Her father and Naruto were both watching and she wanted to make them proud. She would go all out, no holding back.

Her opponent eyed her with a good bit of respect. Hinata certainly didn't look like much but she was a Hyuga, and the Hyuga had a well earned reputation for their gentle fist style. *Her gentle fist won't do her any good if she can't get near me. It doesn't really matter*

whether I win or lose; I just need to keep her busy for another... thirteen minutes.

Genma raised his hand and then dropped it. "Begin."

Even as Hinata activated her byakugan Temari leapt back and fully opened her fan. " **Great Wind Storm.**" It was a powerful area attack designed to keep Hinata at a safe distance. It worked as Hinata was struck by it and forced back. She quickly realized she could not move forward in the face of such a strong wind jutsu.

She fell to one knee in order to brace herself and consider her options. She was no genius like Shikamaru or Neji, but she was intelligent and very observant. She noted that the entire edge of the arena floor had trees and other vegetation, providing good cover. She noticed that while the dirt in front of her was being thrown into the air the dirt behind where Temari was standing was still. Temari's jutsu didn't have a 360 degree range of effect; it effected the direction she was facing. Hinata smiled as she came up with a very simple, but hopefully effective plan. Jyuden had shown her that when the direct path was denied you there were other ways to reach your target.

She performed some simple hand signs and was suddenly replaced by a log.

Seeing her opponent perform a substitution Temari ended her jutsu, no point wasting valuable chakra. She had a sharp mind and good eye as well. Since they were forbidden from leaving the arena area there was only one place she could be. The girl had to be hiding among the cover along the wall. Temari shook her head, if the girl wanted to drag things out that was fine. Heck, she could have a little bit of fun while she waited for the war to start.

"You know I've heard all about how strong and powerful the Hyuga are. It's such a shame to see one of its members being such a coward." Temari called out loudly. Hearing this the crowd booed.

"What did she just say?!" Naruto cried out. "How dare she call Hinata a coward!"

Kankuro was still on the balcony and smirked at the blonde boy's tirade. "Well what do you expect kid, she's hiding right now. That's not exactly brave behavior."

"Neither is forfeiting your match." Shino pointed out.

"Neither is attacking someone in a hospital bed." Shikamaru said sharply.

"Or threatening a little kid half your size." Naruto reminded him of their first meeting. "I don't want to hear anything from *you* about courage, since you obviously don't know anything about it."

Kankuro gave the three of them a hard smile. "Hey now, sorry if I offended." *In twelve minutes I am so going to enjoy killing all three of you.*

Suddenly and without warning a dozen kunai came at her from all directions. Temari dodged and saw a dozen Hinatas coming at her from every section of the wall. *That's not a bad idea, but it won't work.* " **Great Wind Storm.**" She directed the jutsu towards half the targets. Sure enough five kept coming on as though completely unaffected by the wind, the sixth came to a halt and fell over.

"You'll have to do better than that. Since bushins aren't affected by physical attack only the real you would be knocked down." Temari said smugly.

"Unless I ordered one of my bushins to deliberately fall down." A voice right behind her said an instant before six palm strikes slammed into her back and sent her to the ground.

And in that moment when she held the advantage, to Hinata's credit, she decided not to hold back. "You are within the range of my attack,

Eight Trigrams Sixty-Four Palms. " With that she launched the specialized attack on her opponent and shut down all of her chakra points. It was over. Temari was defeated and could not continue.

"Winner, Hyuga Hinata." Genma called out.

Hinata stood there basking in the glow of her victory and in the thundering applause from a partisan crowd. She looked up into the crowd and hoped both her father and Naruto were proud of her.

In the stands Hiashi gave a satisfied nod. "Truly she is worthy of her place as both my daughter and clan heir."

"OH YEAH!! Hinata -chan you are so awesome!"

Kuromaru came to a sudden halt. "I smell something."

Tsume sniffed the air herself. "I've got it, maybe twelve scents I've never picked up in the village before. Whoever they are they're strangers."

"There's more," like his pup Akamaru Kuromaru had the ability to smell chakra. "They're doing something that involves a monstrous amount of chakra."

"Well then let's go pay them a visit."

The ANBU captain with the rabbit mask called yet another halt and asked Neji to again scout out the area. Despite the mounting monotony he obeyed. He took a look at what was around them. And all of a sudden he wasn't bored anymore.

"I see Suna ninjas! There are dozens, no, hundreds of them! All within a mile and a half of us and heading towards the village."

"Are you absolutely sure they are enemy ninja?" Captain Anzo asked. Bringing that many ninja this close to Konoha with out permission was a blatant act of war.

"I am positive I can read the symbols on their hitai-ites."

"How far away are they, how many are there, and what direction are they moving in?"

Neji did a quick count. "I count three hundred within my sight. They are about a mile and a half due west of us and they're moving northwest, almost straight for the gates."

"Outstanding Neji," Anzo quickly got on the general frequency. He was sure these three hundred were only part of a much larger force. "This is patrol seven to all units, I am declaring sun rays down, I repeat I am declaring sun rays down. Three hundred confirmed sector H 114 moving northwest."

"What do we do now?" Tenten asked. She hadn't honestly expected to be fighting in a war when she got up this morning.

"Now? Now we haul ass back to the village and get ready to fight like hell."

And that was exactly what they did.

Ibiki was watching on a television monitor as Inoichi was flying over the eastern approaches to the village. He thought he spotted something. He hit the send button for the radio communicator on the collar.

"Inoichi, could you go down and sweep past that clearing?"

Over the transmitter came a loud squawk in reply and the eagle immediately flew down lower. Ibiki soon had a clear view.

"Oh hell no!" There were dozens of Sound ninja in their weird cow spotted uniforms. One of them spotted the eagle and the metal collar around his neck. In the next instant there were a dozen kunai flying in and then no picture. Inoichi grunted in pain and sat up quickly coughing up blood.

"Damn, I barely broke the connection in time." Inoichi said.

"You all right? Ibiki asked.

"Just fine, did you see them?"

"I sure as hell did." Ibiki said grimly.

"Did you see them as well Hokage-sama?" Inoichi asked.

Sarutobi nodded. "I certainly did, there's seems to be no doubt now."

As if to confirm those words an ANBU entered the room. "Hokage-sama, we have just received an alert from patrol seven. They report a force of three hundred Suna nin heading towards the gates. They declared, 'sun rays down.'"

Sarutobi nodded, he was feeling strangely calm now that the moment had come. Sun rays down was he code phrase meaning Konoha was under attack. "They have chosen war, and Kami alone knows how it will end." He looked at Ibiki. "Sound the alarm; contact all ANBU and other active units. Inform them to put defense plan four into operation."

"Hai, Hokage-sama!"

Sarutobi readied himself to face war again with the certainty he had done all that he could to prepare his village.

A dozen Suna ninja were just beginning the summoning ritual when a hail of kunai and shuriken slaughtered half of them. Two kunai with

explosive notes landed in the middle of the large summoning circle and detonated, completely destroying the intricate runes that had been drawn.

"You won't be summoning anything today!" Tsume shouted. She bared her teeth and led the way as they attacked with the kind of ferocity that only Inuzuka defending their home could show.

The Sarutobi sitting in the Hokage's box suddenly disappeared with a puff of smoke.

Jiraiya knew exactly what that meant. "Crap, and I was going to do some research later too." He disappeared in a swirl of wind and leaves.

Almost immediately the sirens began to sound. They went off with three short blasts, paused for ten seconds, and repeated the pattern.

"Are those the sirens?" Naruto asked. "Is this a drill?"

Shikamaru glared at him, for once seeming totally alert and ready to act. "Naruto you baka that signal means **invasion imminent**. The village is about to be attacked."

Temari was still down on the arena floor helpless with Hinata and Genma standing over her. "Damn it!" Kankuro leapt off the balcony and raced to try and rescue his sister.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?!" Naruto leapt out after him with Shino and Shikamaru following.

In the stands confusion reigned. The leaf nins began leaving the stands to help man the defenses. Seeing this some of the hidden sound agents decided to attack them even without a genjutsu to help. The sight of enemy ninja in their midst sent people screaming

and stampeding in all directions. The leaf nins meanwhile (all of them) promptly attacked the sound nins who did not have the advantage of surprise or of numbers. Seeing their comrades fighting for their lives the remaining sound nins shed their disguises and joined in.

Hearing the sirens signal invasion imminent Kabuto asked for the check. The tea and cake had been excellent and he only thought it right that he pay for them.

Hinata and Genma were both surprised as Kankuro grabbed his sister and faced off against them. Baki was quickly at his side while Naruto, Shino, and Shikamaru stood beside their fellow leaf nins.

Naruto looked up at the stands to see the madness going on there. "What the hell is happening?"

"It's called war Naruto." Genma answered grimly. "Listen up you four; I'm afraid the exams are over. I'm assigning you all a mission."

"Yes?" Shikamaru asked as he readied to cast his jutsu.

"This is your mission; kill every ninja you see without the leaf hitai-ite. Starting with these three right here."

"Brave words!" Kankuro shouted.

"If you value your lives surrender, otherwise we will fight to kill." Genma stated. All four of the prospective Chunin looked ready to carry out the threat.

"No," Baki answered simply and readied to attack with his deadliest jutsu.

And just at that moment, in the space directly between the two groups Kakashi and Sasuke materialized.

Kakashi noted the stand off and the chaos in the stands as well as the blaring of the siren. He rubbed the back of his neck and looked at Genma. "Did we come at a bad time?"

Battle begins

Genma just shook his head in mild disgust. "Trust you to arrive late even to a war."

With the sudden arrival of the legendary copy ninja the odds changed.

"Temari, can you fight at all?" Baki whispered.

"I'm sorry sensei," Temari whispered back. "But I have no chakra right now."

"Damn it," Baki growled and came to a swift decision. He turned to Kankuro. "We're retreating."

"But..."

He glowered at the boy. "Don't question me! I said retreat!"

Kankuro paled and quickly nodded. "Yes sensei." Still holding his sister in his arms they turned and fled, climbing the arena wall and then over it.

"Hey!" Naruto shouted. He was about to go after them when Genma threw a hand in front of him.

"Let them go." Genma said.

Naruto turned to look at the instructor as though he were crazy. "Say what?"

Genma simply nodded to the stands. "Our battle is right here. If they've left the battle that's enough for now. We need to kill the enemy who are still attacking our people."

Kakashi gave a confirming nod. "He's right Naruto. We have plenty of enemies right here to deal with." He looked at Genma. "By the way, I don't see Gaara anywhere. Do you know where he is right now?"

Genma, Naruto, Hinata, and Shikamaru all gawked at him. Shino didn't gawk but even he seemed surprised.

"What?" Kakashi asked.

"Where the hell have you been the last 24 hours?" Genma demanded.

Kakashi grinned weakly and rubbed the back of his neck. "Ah, well actually Sasuke and I have camped out the last few days so we could concentrate 100 percent on training."

"Next time bring a radio or get a paper delivered. Short version; Gaara murdered Lee, after which an enraged Guy killed Gaara." Genma told him.

"What? Lee and Gaara are dead? What about Guy?" Kakashi asked.

"Hospitalized," Genma answered. "Save the rest of your questions until after the fighting Kakashi. Why don't you take your students and I'll take charge of the other three?"

"That works," Kakashi agreed and looked at the two boys. "This is serious business; these guys are playing for keeps which means we have to do the same. There's only one way to deal with enemy ninja in our village, and that's kill them. Do you both understand?"

"Got it," Sasuke said with just a hint of eagerness.

"Right!" Naruto answered fiercely. The memory of Lee's body in the middle of all that blood filled him with anger. The memory of Hinata's screams and the screams he was hearing now from the civilians

caught in the cross fire settled things for him. "We need to kill, no holding back, no mercy."

Kakashi nodded his approval. Naruto seemed more serious than before. "That's exactly right Naruto. Why don't you make some clones and send them into the stands? At the very least they'll provide useful diversions for the leaf nins already engaged. Then you and Sasuke stay close to me."

Sasuke looked over to Naruto with a smirk. "I've picked up some new tricks, just try and keep up."

Naruto glared at him. "Oh yeah? Well I've learned some tricks too. You'll be the one trying to keep up." He ran through the familiar hand signs. " **Kage Bushin no Jutsu.**"

Puffs of smoke filled the arena floor all around them. Two hundred shadow clones came into being. Almost instantly they disappeared as they ran towards different sections of the stands. Everyone who was still standing there was shocked at the *speed* with which they moved.

Hinata looked at the original who was still standing there with his sensei and his teammate. "Naruto-kun how did you do that?"

Naruto just grinned and rubbed the back of his head. "I told you I learned some new techniques Hinata-chan."

Both Kakashi and Sasuke were staring at him and wondering just what exactly he had learned.

I'm going to need to talk to Ebisu when I get the chance and find out what exactly he taught him. Kakashi thought. But that would have to wait. "All right, Naruto and Sasuke follow me and stay close."

As the two of them followed their sensei into battle Sasuke took a quick side long glance at Naruto. Just how had his shadow clones gotten so fast in just a month? He couldn't have gone through the

same physical training Kakashi had given him. Could he? Sasuke looked away and told himself to ignore the odd feelings he was experiencing. He would never tell anyone what he was feeling at that moment thinking about Naruto.

Jealousy, and a little fear.

She was going to die.

It had all happened so fast.

One minute they were cheering Hinata's victory. Then the sirens sounded. And then there were suddenly Sound ninja everywhere and they were *killing* people. Sitting with Ino and Chouji she knew they should have acted better. They were leaf nins, even if they were caught by surprise and unarmed. But in the sudden confusion the three of them had found themselves caught in a stampede. People all around her were trying desperately to get to the exits and without anyone to give her orders Sakura was simply following along.

Suddenly the man and woman right in front of her screamed and staggered to the floor. Standing there now was a Sound nin still holding the bloody kunai in his grip. His eyes saw through her, she wasn't an enemy ninja or even a person, just a target. He was a living scythe cutting down the wheat and all she was to him was the next stalk. Time seemed to slow down as she saw him pull his hand back and then forward to slice open her throat.

She froze. In that instant before death she was powerless to do anything at all.

Then there was a blur of orange right in front of her face. In the next second it penetrated that the enemy ninja was being thrown away from her. *His* throat cut almost clean through. She stood there shocked and numb, realizing she had gone from being dead to being saved in the space of a single heartbeat.

"Sakura-chan! Are you all right?"

It took a moment for her to recognize the blood splattered face in front of her. "Na... Naruto?"

He quickly nodded. "Are you all right Sakura-chan?" His face and clothing had blood on them and in his right hand he held a bloody kunai.

It was taking too long but the reality was sinking in. *Naruto killed him, he just saved my life!* And even as the thought struck her a small part of her wished it had been Sasuke. She stamped down on that thought and shook her head trying to get back to her senses.

"Naruto-kun what is going on?"

"We're at war," he answered succinctly. Seeing Ino and Chouji also there he removed his weapons pouch and handed it over to Sakura. "You three can share what I have. I'm a clone so if I get dispelled they'll disappear to." He gave Sakura a look of such intensity that it scared her a little. "Don't worry Sakura-chan I won't let you get hurt."

With that he disappeared, only to reappear a few rows over killing another enemy ninja.

"Is that Naruto?!" Ino shouted.

"I... I think so." She still felt a little in shock but she pulled out a kunai and a couple shuriken and then handed the pouch to Ino.

Ino was staring open mouthed as he seemed to teleport through the air to attack a third enemy ninja while they were still trying to figure out what to do. "When did he suddenly get so amazing?" Ino cried out.

"I don't know." Sakura answered dully. *I could have died just now.* She thought. *I would have died, except for Naruto.*

Patrol seven ran through the half closed gates.

"The enemy's almost here, shut the gates!" The ANBU captain shouted.

The gates were shut. There were inscriptions written onto the wooden gates and well hidden for just this sort of emergency. A Chunin ran up to them and quickly read them off activating them.

" Triple Demon Gates Seal."

Immediately three huge sealed metal doors rose up out of the ground directly behind the wooden gates. Just like that the weakest point in the wall had been transformed into the strongest.

Neji, Tenten, and the rest of the patrol quickly ran up the side of the wall to help defend it. They were far from alone as a large force was already present. A steady stream of reinforcements kept coming in as well. The wall around Konoha was thirty feet high and fifteen feet thick, constructed of steel reinforced concrete. Explosive notes and jutsus could blow chunks out of it, but it would be very hard to bring down. (At least without a gigantic snake or sand demon to help.) And it would provide excellent cover to the defenders.

On top of the wall Neji and Tenten stood side by side ready to begin fighting.

With his Byakugan active he calmly nodded. "They are nearly here." For Neji this was almost welcomed. It was a chance to prove himself in real live combat in front of unbiased observers.

Tenten had a small pile of various weapons out and scrolls with plenty more weapons sealed inside them ready. She looked over to her teammate. "You know we just might get killed here today."

Neji nodded. "No doubt some of us will die here on this wall, and only destiny knows who or how many or how this will end."

She continued to look at him. She finally decided that if she was going to die it would be with at least knowing the answer to one question. "Neji, if we live would you go on a date with me?"

He turned and gave her a surprised look. "You're asking me that now?"

She shrugged. "I don't know if I have a later and I really want to know."

He gave her a very slight smile and nodded. "All right, if we both survive I will take you on a date."

"Really?"

He again nodded. "Yes, now here they come."

With a furious shout the first wave of sand nins leapt forward throwing a hail of kunai with explosive notes. They were met by an even heavier storm of kunai and shuriken.

Outside the east wall the sound nins had gathered.

Orochimaru stood in his ninja gear, his Kazekage disguise at last discarded. As he stood there he could hear the pleasing sound of battle wafting in on the breeze. He had not received any reports and assumed all was going according to plan.

"You understand your orders?" Orochimaru said calmly.

Sakon nodded. "Yes Lord Orochimaru, we are to remain near you but not to engage until the Third Hokage arrives."

"Ku, ku, ku that's right." Orochimaru looked calm and certain. In his mind there was only one way this day could end, and that was with the death of his sensei and the destruction of the village. "Now I think it is finally time for us to join in the fun." With his thumb nail he

sliced down the tattoo on his forearm. There was a massive puff of smoke.

Orochimaru found himself riding on top of a gigantic snake.

A cross Manda glared at the human standing on his head.
"Orochimaru! I have warned you to never summon me unless you have a sacrifice of at least a hundred humans prepared!"

Orochimaru grinned at the boss summon's wrath. "Oh but I have! I have prepared a magnificent sacrifice of thousands for you."

The giant snake looked about and spotted his sound troops who were looking up nervously. "You mean them?"

"Oh no, your sacrifice is over there." He pointed to the village wall that was a few miles away.

The giant snake hissed angrily. "That is no proper sacrifice! You brought me here to do your fighting for you."

"Ku, ku, ku well that's true enough." Orochimaru admitted. "But the fact is that there are thousands of delicious little treats for you just waiting there. I know you don't object to a little hunting and the battle will probably prove amusing."

The snake eyed the village and considered it. "Very well, seeing as I am already here I will consider this a sacrifice, *this time*. But I warn you to have a proper sacrifice prepared the next time you summon me."

"Of course," Orochimaru agreed.

Manda began heading for the village with the sound ninja trailing behind him.

The fighting in the stadium did not last long. Without a genjutsu to eliminate the interference of the weaker leaf nins the sound agents had found themselves terribly out numbered. Many of them quickly realized they had no hope of victory and decided to do what damage they could, massacring the herd of civilians around them. Cowardly or not some of the sound nins made a point of killing as many as they could whether they were men, women, or children.

And in every section throughout the arena a figure with an orange jumpsuit appeared fighting to help the leaf nins protect the people.

A young mother collapsed into her seat clutching her five year old son to her breast. There were bodies all around her and the sound ninja towered over her. She screamed knowing that she and her little boy were next.

And then there was an orange blur in front of her and the sound ninja was collapsing back into the seats in front of her, three or four kunai in his chest.

In his place was a young boy of twelve or so with spiky blonde hair and a leaf hitai-ite. He looked over to her with concern. "Are you all right?"

All she could do was nod.

"Don't worry! I'm Uzumaki Naruto and I'll protect everyone here!" He seemed to disappear again.

"Did he say he was Naruto? The demon?" An old man behind her said.

The woman suddenly turned around to look at him. "Shut up! Don't call him that when he just saved me and my son and probably everyone standing here."

The old man frowned. "Do you know what he is?"

"A hero!" She shouted at him. Her boy was crying and she tried to comfort him.

All around her people had seen what had happened and listened to the exchange. Slowly most of them, though not all, began to nod their agreement.

The fighting finally ended though not the chaos. Even with all the enemy in the stadium finally killed the crowd was still in a panic trying to get out. The only area where the ninja could meet and reorganize themselves was the arena floor. There Kakashi, Asuma, and Kurenai were able to meet with their teams.

Hinata immediately ran over to Naruto and hugged him fiercely. She had seen his clones fighting all around her. "Are you all right Naruto-kun?"

He smiled and nodded as he returned her hug. "I'm just fine Hinata-chan. How about you?"

"I am fine." Hinata replied.

"Naruto?"

With Hinata still in his arms he turned his head a bit to look at Sakura, Ino and Chouji. The three of them were all looking at him strangely, especially Sakura. "What is it Sakura-chan?"

"Naruto I... I want to thank you for saving me." *Even though it should have been Sasuke.* Again she ruthlessly stamped down on the thought. Naruto had saved her life! Was she really so shallow as to be upset simply because he wasn't Sasuke?

Behind her Ino and Chouji both nodded. "You were amazing Naruto!" Ino said. "How did you ever get so powerful?"

Not used to hearing thanks or praise from Ino or Sakura he blushed a little. "Oh, thanks, I just had some really wonderful training over the past month."

"Just what sort of training?" An upset Sasuke demanded. He hadn't gotten a chance to do anything! By the time they'd gotten into the stands the fighting was almost over and the three of them had failed to even find an enemy. Meanwhile he'd been forced to watch as all across the stadium Naruto's shadow clones were fighting, and now this.

Sasuke was not the only one impressed. "Naruto you saved Sakura's life?" Kakashi asked.

"He did sensei," Sakura confirmed. "He killed a sound nin that was right in front of me. I would have definitely died without him." *I was so weak I couldn't save myself.* Memories of Wave came back to her. Memories of how she had done nothing while Kakashi, Sasuke, and Naruto all risked their lives. She thought back to the forest of death. There at least she'd fought and she thought she'd done well. But had she? She had done all she could and still been overwhelmed. Ultimately she'd been saved by Lee, team ten, and Sasuke. *Am I really so weak that I always need saving?*

"You've killed?" Sasuke said in surprise.

Naruto nodded and looked to Kakashi a little worried. "I was supposed to right?"

Kakashi nodded and grinned. "Absolutely! I'm very proud of you Naruto! You did what you had to and it seems that you did it very well. Do you know how many your clones killed?"

Naruto nodded, he'd dismissed the clones and so had all their memories. "Fifteen."

Sasuke stared at him. *The dobe killed fifteen enemy ninja in just a few minutes?!* Even with shadow clones that was unbelievable.

Kakashi was also surprised not just by the number but by the calm way it had been delivered. Somewhere along the line the hyperactive knucklehead had grown up some and was turning into a real ninja.

Hinata turned her face up and gave him a look of such pure admiration that he began blushing again.

Kakashi shook his head. "Naruto when all this is over we're going to sit down and you are going to tell me *everything* that has happened since I saw you last. But for right now there is more work to be done. The fighting in here may be over but this battle isn't, I need to assign you missions."

Asuma and Kurenai both nodded as well.

"Hinata and Shino," Kurenai spoke up. "I want the two of you to help get as many civilians as possible to the cliff shelters. Once you get them there you're to stay and help guard them."

Shino looked at her. "Given the manner in which you phrased that mission statement is it correct to presume that your presence in this endeavor is not to be expected?"

Kurenai grinned. "I'm a Jonin; my place is on the front line wherever that may be. You and Hinata are not ready yet."

Both Shino and Hinata nodded accepting her instructions without feeling any insult.

Asuma looked at his squad. "Ino and Chouji, stay near Shino and Hinata and help them. All of you try to stay close to each other so you can back each other up if need be." His eyes went to his other student. "Shikamaru, you're coming with me."

Shikamaru let out a sigh. "Oh man this is going to be so troublesome."

"Hey!" Ino shouted. "Why does he get to go and not me?" She demanded.

"Because I think he's ready and you're not." Asuma informed her. "His abilities may prove extremely useful and I trust him not to take any unnecessary risks."

"That is so not fair sensei!" Ino complained.

Asuma shook his head. "I'm sorry Ino, but my decision is final. We are at war now and I have to think about what is best for the village as well as for all of you. Don't think this mission is a cake walk. There may well be more ninja inside the village. This is a real mission Ino and you'll need to approach it as one."

Hearing that settled her down and she finally nodded her agreement.

Kakashi looked at his three students. He especially looked at Sasuke. *This is going to cause trouble later on.* "Naruto, how much chakra do you have left?"

"Tons!" Naruto answered.

"Enough to make more shadow clones?"

"Oh yeah!" He swiftly performed the jutsu and in short order another two hundred smiling blondes surrounded them.

Kakashi looked out at all the smiling faces and nodded. "You're with me Naruto. Sasuke and Sakura, stay with the others and help them get the civilians to safety."

Sakura meekly nodded.

Sasuke's reaction was less accepting.

"What?!" He shouted outraged. "You're taking the dobe but not me? I'm ready for this and you know it!"

Kakashi shook his head. "You are ready to face a dangerous opponent in the finals of the Chunin exams. Going out to fight an enemy in a battle is something else entirely. You're not ready for that Sasuke, and I refuse to put your life in unnecessary risk."

"But you'll take the dobe with you." Sasuke said darkly.

Naruto sent his rival a triumphant smile. "Hey, nobody cares if I get killed. The whole village would probably go into mourning if they lost their precious Uchiha."

Sasuke glared at him. "Shut up dobe!"

"Naruto-kun," Hinata said in a small voice. "You're wrong, I would care." She almost seemed on the verge of tears.

He looked at her and felt suddenly ashamed at his flip words that had affected Hinata so strongly. "I know that Hinata-chan, I was just kidding."

"You're still a baka Naruto." Sakura spoke up. "I would care too, and so would a lot of others." Ino, Shikamaru, Kakashi and everyone else began to nod.

Everyone except a petulant Sasuke.

Kakashi sighed; this would cause him a lot of grief later on. "Sasuke whether you like it or not your mission is to help protect the civilians. As a ninja of this village I expect you to carry out that mission to the best of your abilities."

Sasuke looked rebellious, but ultimately nodded. "Fine."

With that the two groups split up and headed out to do their respective jobs.

Battle continues

Author's Notes: I've had a bunch of complaints about the story's title. To be honest I'm not in love with it. It seemed a good title for a one shot but not for a longer story. Tell me what you think.

Hurricane force winds struck the top of the wall, momentarily forcing the defenders to put their heads down until they could counter. Thirty sand nins took advantage to try and make a rush. They flew across a couple hundred yards of open ground between the tree line and the damn wall. As they ran they tried not to step on the bodies of their fallen comrades. It was difficult as the whole area was littered with dead Suna nin. The forces of Sand had already paid a heavy price and they had still *not* made it into Konoha. The Leaf nins were fighting like mad to hold them out and they had the advantage of both height and cover.

As they rushed forward they were greeted by piles of corpses along the base. One or two were leaf nins, all the rest were sand nin who had also tried to rush up and into Konoha. It was the damn wall. They'd thrown hundreds of explosive tags at it along with their most powerful jutsus. They had torn out gashes and chunks in the thing. There was not an inch of it still unmarked; the wall was a mess of cracks, rough edges, and chunks of twisted steel. It looked much more like a jagged cliff rather than a manmade thing. The problem was despite everything they could throw at it the damn thing just wouldn't come down! Nowhere did it seem ready to collapse, it remained a terrible obstacle that gave their enemies every advantage.

They had been told that a mighty snake summons provided to them by their ally Orochimaru would clear their way into Konoha. But it had never come. Some looked hopefully about as though it might still arrive to help them. Others assumed something had just gone wrong with the summons. And a few were already whispering that

Orochimaru had betrayed them and the summons had been a lie to convince them to attack. They had also been told, originally, that Gaara would be in the middle of Konoha wrecking the place and sucking in every last leaf nin.

Well Gaara was dead, and it seemed every last leaf nin was on that damn wall throwing down fire jutsus or pieces of metal with sharp edges or explosive tags. For the forces of Suna this battle was becoming a slaughter. But even if that was so, they were ninja and they had their orders. And they had the courage to at least try and follow them.

Thirty ninja leapt over the pile of bodies at the base of the wall and ran up its jagged side hoping that *this* time they could get a foot hold on the top.

A pair of Suna nin jumped up onto his part of the wall. There was not enough room along the crowded walkway for him to use the rotation technique he had developed. And he lacked the luxury of time to use the fancier and more formal moves he had. In his hands the jyuken fighting style could be beautiful and artistic. But it could also be swift and brutal when needed. With his byakugan active Neji swept forward to the wall's edge and slammed an open palm to the man's chest and pumped in enough chakra to stop his heart. He could see the look of shock and fear on the man's face as he clutched his chest and then collapsed over the side.

Neji turned to his other opponent ready to deal with him. Before he even got a chance to the man opened his mouth and spat out a stream of blood before toppling down to the ground below. As he fell Neji saw the three kunai sticking out of his back.

Tenten was at his side looking for targets without any leaf nins in the way. The two of them watched as the rest of the Suna nins were quickly dealt with. A couple leaf nins died and fell off the wall. A couple more went down with (hopefully) non-lethal injuries. But after just a few minutes every last sand nin that had made it to the top

was dead. Those that had not fallen over were unceremoniously tossed off to make room for the defenders.

Neji looked out into the forest. The trees provided cover from regular sight but not from his. "It looks like they're forming up for another try."

Tenten shook her head in wonder and in honest admiration. Even though the bodies were piling up the sand nins refused to quit. "Kami they're brave."

Neji looked over to her. "Kami they're stupid."

A couple sentries on the eastern wall threw kunai with explosive notes. They exploded against Manda's thick skin. For all the damage they caused the ninja might as well have thrown pebbles. Manda's body slammed down and the wall crumbled beneath his weight as though made of wet sand. All about him people began screaming and running in terror for their lives. Seeing this Manda swooped in and began taking the sacrifices he'd been promised.

Laughing Orochimaru called out to the ninja who were following in Manda's path. "Stay well clear of him or you'll end up a part of his meal."

Seeing the eagerness with which Manda was feeding the sound nins did just that as they began to spread out into the village.

"I beg pardon Lord Orochimaru," Sakon said. "But if you send off all your ninja won't you be leaving yourself exposed?"

Orochimaru looked at him with a wicked grin. "I have Manda and you four, besides do you think me helpless?"

"Never Lord Orochimaru!"

Orochimaru looked back into the village. He was looking at the cliff. Specifically he was staring at the visage of his old teacher.

"Besides," he hissed. "I wouldn't want it to be too hard for dear old Sarutobi sensei to come and say hello."

On a black and white monitor Sarutobi could see the distant image of a giant snake leveling buildings. On a few other monitors little black dots skipped across the screen and were gone. Those were individual ninja that were breaking into Konoha, into *his* home.

"All available ninja are being sent into the eastern section of the village." Ibiki informed him. "The forces on the south end are holding firm and don't seem to need any reinforcement."

"Good," Sarutobi nodded absently. All the plans were in place and things were running smoothly. He hardly seemed needed here. Inoichi had already left, he was going to find his old teammates and fight beside them. Inoichi felt his place was on the field of battle. Sarutobi got up out of his seat. "You're doing very well Ibiki; I leave the coordination of our defenses to you."

Ibiki turned in alarm as did the ANBU who were present. "Are you going somewhere Hokage-sama?"

Sarutobi nodded. "There is something I need to take care of, something I should have handled a long time ago."

"Let me guess, you're going to kill Orochimaru." A familiar voice spoke up.

Sarutobi turned to the new arrival. "That is correct Jiraiya. I had the opportunity to kill him long ago, but I allowed foolish sentimentality to stop me. All the harm that he has caused since that day is my responsibility. Today I will correct that mistake and kill him."

"Well that's pretty noble of you old man." Jiraiya said. "I just never thought you would abandon your duty as Hokage in order to settle a personal score. Didn't you always used to say that the Hokage's duty was to protect the village and the villagers above all else?"

Sarutobi frowned. "That is exactly what I intend to do."

Jiraiya shook his head. "What you're trying to do is settle an old debt. Orochimaru needs to die. You don't have to be the one to kill him, that's what I'm here for. Your place as Hokage is here, directing the defense of the village."

"I believe Lord Jiraiya to be correct Hokage-sama." Ibiki put in. "The proper place for a general is in the command tent, not on the front line."

The ANBU all nodded swift agreement. Above all else they wanted to keep their beloved Hokage safe.

"Besides," Jiraiya added. "What if you were to be killed? What would happen to the village?"

"The village is greater than any one man." Sarutobi answered firmly. "Konoha would survive."

"And who will lead if we lose you?"

Sarutobi frowned a bit. That was a damn good question. He'd been putting off the idea of finding another successor. *Maybe it's about time I gave that some thought.* "The council would find someone I'm sure."

"And in the meantime there would be panic in the streets and a power struggle at the top. Is that what you want?"

"It wouldn't be as bad as that," Sarutobi insisted.

"Well it sure wouldn't be good. The village needs you old man. Let me and the other ninja fight for you, that's our duty. Yours is to make the decisions and make sure they're good ones."

Sarutobi didn't like it. Where Orochimaru was concerned he felt a personal responsibility. But Jiraiya's argument made a distressing

amount of sense. "Very well, I suppose I must admit that this is my proper place." To everyone's vast relief he sat back down in his seat.

"Good," Jiraiya said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a snake to kill."

They had been heading towards the gate and the south wall when they heard and saw the east wall come tumbling down. It was sort of hard to miss a gigantic snake running amuck. Immediately Kakashi and the others changed direction and headed to the new trouble spot without bothering to wait for any formal orders.

It was not long before they ran into trouble.

Three sound nins landed surrounding a small crowd of civilians trying to get away. Their lord's orders had been clear. Konoha would be left a smoking ruin. And it was to be left a graveyard, there were to be no survivors. The three enemy nin were about to get to work when a shadow came out of a nearby alleyway and merged with theirs. The three nin suddenly found themselves unable to move. They were helpless as an angry looking leaf nin came up to them. He took a trench knife out and very quickly and neatly dispatched them. The civilians shouted out their thanks and got running again.

Asuma turned to the alley as he cleaned the blood off his weapon. "Good job Shikamaru."

Shikamaru came out of the shadows rubbing the front of his neck. "That is *really* not a pleasant feeling."

Asuma chuckled as he lit a fresh cigarette. "Then you better not ever let your throat get slit. Now come on, let's find some more targets."

A pair of sound nins were running along the roof tops when they suddenly found themselves in the middle of a thick jungle. Much worse they were sinking in quicksand. Taken by surprise and

momentarily disoriented they followed their instincts by struggling to free themselves from the quicksand.

Never noticing the red eyed woman calmly walking up to them from behind, a kunai in her hand.

This was a dream and a nightmare. It was a dream because this was a chance to really show people what he could do. Naruto had lived his whole life with people telling him he was nothing, that he was worthless. He had planned to show them how wrong they were by winning the Chunin exams. But this was an even better opportunity to show people what he could do. The nightmare was from the fact that his village was being attacked and his people being killed. Even if most of them were mean to him they were still part of his village.

Naruto turned a corner and came to a sudden stop. There in front of him were a bunch of villagers screaming and running for their lives. All along the street were bodies. He was forced to watch as a sound nin stabbed an old man in the throat. The bastard didn't even bother to watch as he fell in a bloody heap. He was heading for an old woman his kunai ready for more. He and three of his friends were slaughtering unarmed civilians.

"Bastards!" Naruto screamed and ran forward as he began working a jutsu. He needed to protect the civilians so he needed to get the ninja away from them. He rushed to the old woman's side. "**Wall of Wind Technique.**" In front of him all the air suddenly solidified into a solid front. He sent the wall forward and it plowed into the four sound nin rudely shoving them back and away from the people he wanted to protect.

He turned to the old woman beside him. "Get out of here I'll take care of them."

The woman was surprised. She knew who he was. She'd often sent the demon angry looks. It was disgusting to have the demon living among them. She hated the demon.

But he had just saved her.

"Bless you," she said and ran.

Naruto forgot about her and the other civilians as he focused on the four ninja in front of him. He quickly performed another jutsu. " **Air Dragon Missile.**" Twenty feet above his head the air began to swirl and the barest outline of a twisting dragon could be seen. Unlike his previous jutsu this one was offensive in nature. He unleashed it and the four ninja all leaped back. Three of them got clear. The fourth was caught in the jaws of the dragon. The dragon snaked up into the air a bit before slamming itself and its prey into the street. When the dust cleared there was a small crater and a broken bleeding body in the middle of it.

Behind him Naruto could hear a sound like birds chirping. The remaining ninja rushed forward, one towards Kakashi and two towards him.

Naruto smiled. Ebisu had taught him a lethal jutsu just yesterday and forbidden him to use it in the exams. It was something to be used only against enemies of the village. Ebisu hadn't expected him to learn it one day, he had shown it to him in the expectation he would get it down after the exams. But just as with the Kage Bushin Naruto had gotten it down in a matter of hours. When he was truly motivated to learn something the dead last of the academy could be surprising.

As the two ninja closed on him he cast his jutsu. " **Blades of Wind.**"

Unlike the previous jutsu the two sound nins never saw this one coming. Normally this jutsu acted on a single target, but Naruto had given it a lot of extra chakra and the two of them were close. They cried out as the blades tore into them, but it was all over in just a few seconds. Naruto stood there drenched in blood, he was a bit stunned. He hadn't expected it to work *that* well . The two ninja were both down, pieces of them scattered and their blood splashed all over the street. One had his neck almost sawed off, it was still attached by a little piece of flesh and lolling twisted and facing the

ground. The other one had both arms gone and his chest torn completely opened.

Naruto had seen and done a lot of killing this day, but this was just a little much. He turned his back on what he'd done and began throwing up.

Kakashi pulled his hand out of his enemy's chest and let the chidori fade out. Since this was going to long day with kami knowing how many enemies he was using chidori rather than raikiri to save chakra. Despite his own battle he had watched as Naruto used three completely new jutsus to defeat three enemies. Kakashi just shook his head. It had taken him an entire month to help Sasuke improve his physical endurance and speed and learn one jutsu. And that was with the help of an active sharingan. In that same time Naruto had gotten the forcing technique down, greatly improved his taijutsu, and learned *three* new jutsu. All without the help of a blood line. He was really beginning to wonder if he'd been focusing on the wrong student.

He squatted down beside a bent over Naruto. "You all right?"

Naruto nodded and quickly wiped his mouth. "Sorry sensei."

"There's nothing to be sorry about Naruto, considering you've never killed before today I'm very impressed. You've done an amazing job so far."

Naruto grinned weakly. "Thanks sensei."

"You ready to go or do you need some more time?"

Naruto stood up. "I'm ready sensei, we can't stop yet." His eyes went to the spot where the giant snake was a few miles away.

Kakashi nodded. "Let's go then."

Manda was in the middle of enjoying himself when a giant frog appeared.

"You!" The giant snake hissed.

Gamabunta glared and put a hand on his sword. "It's time to settle some old scores."

On the snake's head Orochimaru looked unhappy. "Is the old man afraid?" he mocked. "I was hoping to settle things with him face to face."

Jiraiya tossed his head back and laughed. "Afraid? Of a little snakeling like you? He decided that I could deal with you without any trouble."

Orochimaru shook his head. "You always were a fool Jiraiya. If you want to die today that's fine. What do you say we face each other while our summons settle their differences?"

"Fine by me."

The two of them leapt off and wound up on the roof of a nearby warehouse.

Grinning Orochimaru turned back to the four ninja waiting behind him. "Do it."

"Yes Orochimaru-sama." All four answered at once. They swiftly moved to each corner of the roof. " **Shishienjin Four Flames Formation.**" A barrier of crimson chakra formed above and around them, sealing them in.

"What the hell is this?" Jiraiya asked.

"I just want to make sure we have our little reunion without being disturbed." Orochimaru took out a kunai and licked its edge. "You're going to die here today."

"Well one of us is going to die." Jiraiya said.

And Jiraiya was correct.

Battle ends

Author's Notes: As I am sure you are all now aware the story title has now been changed to, A Few Angry Words. That seems a bit more suited to a longer story.

Reading the reviews I was a bit surprised to find that just about all of you expect me to kill Jiraiya. Come on now! Am I the sort of author that would kill off a major character just to advance the story? Uh, on second thought don't answer that.

So did I? Well there's one way to find out.

The two old friends and teammates faced each other.

"Why?" Jiraiya demanded. "Why come back after all this time?"

Orochimaru giggled. "Ku, ku, ku isn't it obvious? I've come for my revenge. I have come to pay back the wrongs done to me by Sarutobi-sensei and this entire village."

"Wrongs done to you?" Jiraiya spat. "Sarutobi loved you! You were always his favorite." Despite himself he couldn't keep a trace of jealousy from his voice.

"And yet he chose another to be his successor."

Jiraiya nodded. "That's right; the old man went with the best choice." Orochimaru stiffened. "Are you going to try and pretend that was the reason you turned on your fellow villagers? Did you murder and experiment on them out of petty jealousy?"

"No fool, that was always bound to happen. One cannot gain knowledge without sacrifice. Had I been made Hokage I would have experimented on prisoners and enemies. I would have changed Konoha and made it a reflection of my own glory." Jiraiya shivered at

the thought. "But of course, once I realized the ingratitude of sensei and the villagers I decided to begin my work."

Jiraiya shook his head. "You killed dozens of innocent villagers and even some fellow shinobi. You betrayed the village we'd fought so hard to protect, and for what? What knowledge could be worth such a price?"

"I'll show you." Orochimaru reached up and tore off his face.

Baki, Kankuro, and Temari finally made it to their fellow sand nin. They'd had a hard time escaping the village and been forced to kill a few leaf nins. Crow was now carrying Temari and gently set her down as Baki searched for Tomas.

"Where is the general?" Baki asked.

"Dead," came the reply. "He was killed at the very start."

"Why are we still outside the village?" Baki demanded. "What happened to the summons?"

Several sand nins looked at each other and shrugged.

"It never showed up," one of them answered. "We've been trying to breach the wall ever since."

Baki looked around; he estimated there were about 500 ninja.

"Where are the rest of our forces?"

"They're feeding the crows out by the wall." Came the bitter reply.

"They're dead?" To his horror all the heads bobbed up and down. Suna had always had a much smaller population than Leaf. That was why they'd been forced to rely on the quality of their ninja and been willing to do what they did to Gaara. Suna only had about 1,400 ninja total as compared to about 3,000 for Konoha. To mount

this attack the Kazekage had stripped the village of every last Jonin and Chunin and all the best qualified Genin. A thousand of Suna's best had come here under the Kazekage's orders.

And in less than an hour half of them were gone.

Baki stood there in shock. This was a disaster! "What does the Kazekage say?"

"We have not seen or heard from the Kazekage since the battle began."

Baki knew something was definitely wrong then. The Kazekage's place was here with his army. "Who is in command then? Who is senior on the field?"

The men all looked at each other and then looked at him. "That would be you now. What are your orders?"

Baki grimaced; he had never wanted command of the army. But it was his whether he wanted it or not, and he knew what had to be done. "We're disengaging," he announced. "We'll pull back three miles and wait for orders from the Kazekage."

"Baki you can't!" Temari called out. "The Kazekage will have your head if you order a retreat!"

"She's right," Kankuro agreed. Neither of them wanted to lose him. Over the years Baki had been more of a father to them than their biological one had.

"I am not ordering a retreat," Baki said. "I am ordering a disengagement. The plan was never for us to try and breach a fully manned wall. If the summons should appear and clear a path for us or if the Kazekage should order it we will renew the attack." He did not mention that he did not expect either to occur.

"They're pulling back." Neji said.

"Are you sure?" Tenten asked. "Maybe they're just forming up for another attack."

Neji shook his head. "No," he said with certainty. "All of them are going."

She smiled. "I guess the fighting is over."

He looked over his shoulder to where a giant snake and frog were battling miles away. "Here at least, I need to report this."

The street was littered with bodies. Some were civilians who had been caught earlier. A handful were leaf nins. But most were sound nin. The invading sound nin were no longer facing helpless villagers. They were now going up against the full might of Konoha's army, and they were being slaughtered. Outnumbered and without the advantage of surprise they were simply no match. The invasion was being stopped and thrown back. The sound nin kept fighting, but they were no longer advancing. They were heading back towards the spot where they had entered.

And in just about every sector where there was fighting Naruto could be seen. His clones not only fought they also worked to evacuate both ninja and civilian casualties. People everywhere were seeing not only his courage but his compassion for the people he was trying to protect. As the fighting raged Naruto's kills and evacuations increased as the number of surviving clones decreased.

During a short lull in the fighting Kakashi, Kurenai, Asuma, and Shikamaru found themselves reunited. Naruto was there as well, bent over and panting.

"Hey Naruto you all right?" Shikamaru asked. Naruto's energy was as legendary as his laziness. To see the blonde so spent he had to be really exhausted.

He looked up and nodded wearily. "I'm fine, it's just that with so many clones using so much energy it's wearing me out a little."

The three senseis all looked at one another knowingly. Forcing used up a *lot* of chakra and physical stamina unless you had extraordinary control. That was the reason most ninja did not use the technique. Even with Naruto's vast reserves it was only to be expected that with so many clones using it their exhaustion would begin to mount. And as they were dispelled that weariness was beginning to tell on the original.

Kakashi approached the two Genin. "Naruto, you've done more than enough already. I want you to stay here and rest for awhile."

"No," he stood up straight. "I'm fine, I can keep going."

"How many clones do you still have out there?"

Naruto's weary mind needed a minute. "About sixty I think."

Kakashi shook his head firmly. "If you're this tired now then you'll be unconscious when they go. I can't let you go into battle under those circumstances."

"But..."

Kakashi put a hand on his shoulder and smiled beneath his mask. "Naruto, you've already done much more than I expected or could have ever asked for. I am very proud of you."

Despite his exhaustion Naruto had a big smile on his face. "Thanks Kakashi-sensei."

The smile faded and Kakashi looked a lot more serious. "Naruto, when all this is over I'm going to teach you a new jutsu."

Naruto looked surprised but a little suspicious. "Really? Or are you just saying that?"

Kakashi was a little hurt at the obvious doubt. *Does he have so little faith in me?* "I definitely will Naruto. But for right now just stay here and rest."

Asuma looked at Shikamaru. "Shikamaru you stay here as well, I know you're starting to run low on chakra."

Unlike Naruto Shika just gave a grateful nod and sat down on the sidewalk.

Naruto watched as the three elite Jonin leapt away to return to the fighting.

"Damn it," he muttered.

"Don't be so troublesome Naruto," Shikamaru said. "You've already made yourself a hero today. What more do you want?"

Naruto looked over in surprise. "A hero? All I've been doing is my job."

Shikamaru just grinned at how thick headed his friend could be at times. "How many enemy ninja have you killed? How many people have you gotten to safety?"

Again Naruto needed a moment; his head seemed kind of foggy. "I've killed fifty I think and gotten maybe two hundred people to the hospital."

Shikamaru just shook his head. "You've killed fifty enemy ninja and rescued a couple hundred of our people. That sure sounds like a hero to me."

Naruto gave him a weary smile. "You really think so?"

"Yeah."

"Well that's good." Feeling tired he sat down and next to Shikamaru and leaned against the side of a wall. He was soon asleep and

snoring.

Orochimaru tore away his face to reveal the face of a young woman.

Jiraiya's very first thought. *Hey, Orochimaru is kind of hot! Ew, ew, I did not just think that.* "I see, so you have come up with *that* jutsu?"

The female Orochimaru laughed. "Indeed I have! Are you jealous Jiraiya? Does my genius leave you feeling inferior?"

Slowly and painfully Jiraiya nodded. "I will admit to being a bit jealous." Orochimaru smirked. "I have always wanted to be able to turn myself into a beautiful woman without relying on a mere henge. Can you make yourself look like Tsunade?"

Orochimaru gaped at him.

"You baka! This is no transformation jutsu!" His face reverted back to his original, much to Jiraiya's disappointment. "I have taken possession of a whole new body. This is Furofushi no Jutsu, the art of immortality. By moving on to new bodies I have found the secret to eternal life! I will finally be able to fulfill my dream and learn every jutsu there is! I will know everything!"

Jiraiya shook his head. "I see, all this has been just to allow you to fulfill your selfish dream? All the pain, all the suffering you've inflicted, all just so you could become immortal huh?" Jiraiya spat in disgust. "You're pathetic! A true ninja does not hide from death. He accepts it, knowing that life must end one day is what gives life its joys and pleasures!"

Orochimaru laughed. "Well if you think so highly of death I won't stand in your way. Let me show you a special jutsu I was planning to show sensei." He grinned cruelly. "Tell me, would you like to see your prized student again?" He ran through some hand signs. "**Kuchiyose Edotensei Summoning Reanimation.**" Before him a vortex formed on the floor and out of it rose three coffins.

Too late Jiraiya recognized their markings. "No!"

Orochimaru laughed as his old teammate's distress. "Yessss."

The coffins opened and three figures shambled out of them. Jiraiya knew all three of course. Two he knew from pictures and from their faces on the cliff wall. But the other face he knew as his most precious and gifted student.

"Oh Minato," he grieved. All the memories, good and bad, flooded back.

Minato looked at him and nodded in recognition. "Hello sensei, it's good to see you again. You look older, how long has it been?"

"Thirteen years kid," he choked out.

A look of worry entered Minato's face. "Naruto, how is he? How is my son?"

Jiraiya looked away, unable to look his beloved student in the eye. "He is well, he is a Genin now."

"Tell me about him," Minato asked eagerly. "Is he happy? Do the people see him as a hero? Have you been training him?"

Jiraiya flinched at each question and tried to think of a way to answer.

Orochimaru found the scene absolutely delicious. He'd always hated Minato as the rival who had stolen the position that was rightfully his. "Ku, ku, ku what's the matter Jiraiya? Your prized student wants to know about his son. Aren't you going to tell him?"

Jiraiya looked hatefully at the man he'd once called friend. "Damn you for this Orochimaru, I swear I'll take you apart for this."

Orochimaru laughed. "Well before you do so please do answer your student. He has waited so very long to hear about dear little Naruto."

"Sensei," Minato pleaded. "Tell me of my son."

Jiraiya looked at his student. "He is a tough, brave little kid who never quits." His mouth closed as he could think of nothing else that was safe to say.

"Is he happy?" Minato asked.

Jiraiya hesitated to answer.

Orochimaru answered instead. "He is miserable and all alone. The people of the village despise him and shun him as a living demon. He has been alone his entire life. He is an orphan who knows nothing of his parents and likely believes he was never wanted or loved. And as for Jiraiya? He has never even spoken to the boy, let alone trained him."

"That's a lie!" Jiraiya snapped. "I met him just a couple weeks ago."

"A couple weeks ago?" Minato repeated. "You abandoned my son all this time?"

"No! Kid I swear it wasn't like that!" Jiraiya tried to explain. "I had duties outside the village. And one mission led to another and I could never get back here. I haven't been in Konoha since just a month ago."

Minato looked at him sadly. "Then you really did abandon him, you left my son all alone."

Jiraiya could hear the accusation and could not really deny the truth to it. He looked down ashamed. "I'm sorry."

"Well, this has been a delightful reunion." Orochimaru approached the three Hokages and planted a kunai with an attached scroll into each of their heads. "But now I have restored their abilities and I think I will have my three little puppets tear you apart."

Jiraiya looked back at Orochimaru. "How did you know about Naruto? You were already gone from the village before he was born and his status was a secret."

"And a well guarded secret at that," Orochimaru agreed. "I had no idea of the truth until I ran into the boy during the second stage of the exams. Only then did I realize the truth. Since then I've had my agents gather information on him. He interests me."

Minato slowly turned to face Orochimaru. "How does my son interest you?" he asked coldly.

Orochimaru smiled. "Oh I can think of a dozen experiments I could use him for. If he survives the battle I plan to take him with me along with one other."

"No," Minato held out a hand and formed a rasengan. "You will not touch him."

Orochimaru shook his head playfully. "Fool, the power of my jutsu binds you to my will. You must obey my every wish."

Minato began to smile; his smile slowly drained away Orochimaru's good humor. "Tell me Orochimaru, do you know how I was able to implant the Kyuubi into my son's body?"

He shrugged; something that had happened so long ago was of no importance. "I assume you used some seal."

Minato shook his head. "You never bothered to learn much about seals did you?"

"Seals do not interest me, only ninjutsu matters."

"But no ninjutsu known could have stopped the Kyuubi. It was a very special seal that saved Konoha that day. Shikifujin, the reaper death seal, I called on the power of a shinigami to transfer the Kyuubi's

spirit into my son. And in order to work the seal I was required to give up my life and my soul to the shinigami."

"So?" Orochimaru asked. "Why should this interest me?"

"Well, because what that means is that my soul is the property of the shinigami. Which also means," he suddenly vanished in a flash of yellow.

Orochimaru screamed as a rasengan tore through his back and out the front of his chest.

"You don't control me." Minato finished calmly.

Orochimaru stared down to see Minato's hand coming out a huge bloody hole in his chest. His mouth opened and spewed up blood and pieces of flesh. "No... it can't... no." He tried to deny it as he felt his body began to shake and grow numb.

Minato leaned in and whispered to him. "The deepest pit in hell is reserved for betrayers. Hell awaits."

Orochimaru let out a final gasp before slipping down to the roof.

Thus did the Yondaime Hokage kill the Sannin Orochimaru.

Sakon, Tayuya, Jirobo, and Kidomaru all cried out and collapsed at that same instant dispelling the barrier.

Anko was enjoying a healthy chase when she came to a sudden stop and screamed. She put both hands to a spot near her neck before collapsing.

Sakura shyly approached Sasuke. They were standing outside one of the entrances to the cliff shelters. They had managed to escort a

large crowd from the stadium all the way here without incident. She, Ino, and Chouji had all been relieved. Sasuke on the other hand had started brooding. His eyes were locked to where a giant snake and frog were battling. His hands were twitching and it was obvious he wanted to go where the fighting was.

Sakura wasn't sure what to say to him. She had tried making conversation a couple times only to receive a cold glare and a dismissive, 'hn.' Just as she was about to try again she saw the mark on his neck suddenly glow red. He grabbed at it and began howling as if he were dying.

Sakura reached out and grabbed a hold of him. "Sasuke-kun! Sasuke what is it?"

Mercifully the screaming ended after only a few seconds and he was unconscious. Sakura looked at his neck and was very surprised to see the mark that had been there gone.

"Give up," Manda muttered even though his fangs were clamped into the frog's back.

"You give up," Gamabunta twisted the sword that was clean through the snake's body.

"Argh," Manda sounded in pain and finally disappeared.

Despite his own wounds Gamabunta smiled triumphantly. "I win." Then he too was gone.

All around them the tide of battle had turned. The sound nins were being driven out. The last remnant of their forces now concerned only with survival. But there was no one near the immediate vicinity in the warehouse.

With Orochimaru's death all his jutsus were ended. The first and second lords Hokage turned to dust, revealing the forms of the two sound nin that had been sacrificed to bring their return. The fourth Hokage managed to hold on just a little longer.

Minato turned to look at Jiraiya. "My time is short sensei, in a moment I will return to the Shinigami's belly. You told me that you loved me like a son. Was that a lie sensei?"

"No! Kid I really do love you like the son I never had."

"Then if you love me sensei, take care of my son. Train him and don't let him be alone anymore." His body began turning to dust. "Promise me!"

Seeing his beloved Minato disintegrating before his eyes Jiraiya shouted. "I promise! I will take care of Naruto, I swear it!"

With those words Minato smiled and held a final look of peace.

Tears from a loved one

Sarutobi was standing on the roof of the tower looking eastward. The sun was beginning to set and the fighting had come to an end. One thing was abundantly clear. Despite the destruction and tragic loss of life, his village had won a great victory today. Initial reports put the losses of his ninja at about fifty dead and twice that many wounded. By comparison Suna had lost about 500 dead and Sound close to 900. The sand nin were already retreating back to Suna with what remained of their army. The sound army had been annihilated almost to the last man, its few survivors running for their lives. His ninja had been magnificent; they had achieved a fourteen to one kill ratio. For every leaf nin killed fourteen enemy nin had died. When news of this battle got out he was sure that his village's reputation would only get stronger. The single most important thing was that the power of the army remained intact.

Looking at the destruction to the eastern part of the village he was reminded that two or three thousand civilians had been killed during this tragic day. He frowned as he took a long puff of his pipe. Well both Sound and Suna were going to regret what they had done here today, as Hokage he would make sure of that. He liked to think of himself as a fair and kind man. But he'd been Hokage through all of the third great ninja war and had no trouble being hard and decisive when the security of his village was at stake.

A figure materialized to his right.

He turned and was on guard, a handful of enemy ninja might still be in the village.

Humming a happy tune Kabuto slipped out of the village. With Orochimaru's death everything had now changed. He had absolutely no loyalty to sound now. He would need to do what was in his own best interest.

Sarutobi relaxed and smiled seeing it was Jiraiya.

"Congratulations Jiraiya, you did a very great thing today." For the first time in awhile he managed a weary smile. "I hear you not only killed Orochimaru but captured all four of his bodyguards. Very impressive I must say."

Jiraiya solemnly shook his head. For once he did not seem at all interested in boasting of his accomplishments. "Not really that impressive, for some reason they all passed out when the bastard died. And as for killing Orochimaru I wasn't the one who did it."

Hearing that Sarutobi was naturally surprised. "Then who did?"

Briefly and succinctly Jiraiya related the events that had taken place. Sarutobi listened carefully, his expression growing sadder with each word.

"Ah, Minato," Sarutobi shook his head sorrowfully. "Even after his death he protected the village. Truly he was a worthy Hokage."

"No," Jiraiya said. "It wasn't for the village. He killed Orochimaru to protect Naruto." Jiraiya looked down dejectedly.

Sarutobi sighed. "I have had reports from dozens of different ninja about him. Every one of them praising his courage and his actions. Despite everything that was done to him he has proven a heroic and loyal ninja. He truly is his father's son."

"I want him for my apprentice." Jiraiya looked back up. "I am going to teach that kid everything I know. When I'm done with him he'll be every bit the ninja his father was."

Sarutobi nodded, after what Jiraiya had told him he was not surprised. "I don't think Kakashi will be pleased."

"Too bad for Kakashi then," Jiraiya said flatly.

Sarutobi sighed again. "He will be your apprentice, but there are other things that have to be dealt with first."

In an ANBU interrogation cell the ninja formerly known as the Sound Four were heavily chained up and under the watch of a number of ANBU. Upon waking Tayuya had started cursing them only to be slapped across the face and told to remain silent. The four of them were forced to stand there and simply wait. None of them had ever imagined that with Orochimaru-sama leading them that they could lose. In their wildest nightmares none of them had ever thought for a second that the great Orochimaru could be killed.

They had all seen it of course, though none of them knew the identity of the killer. Orochimaru had not shared his intentions with any of them, and since none of them were from Konoha they had not recognized the three faces. The barrier had blocked all sound so they had not heard a word spoken. All they knew was that Lord Orochimaru had summoned three ninja to fight for him, and somehow one of them had turned on and killed him.

With his death they had lost the power of the curse seal and passed out from the searing pain. When they had woken up they'd been here. In just one step they'd had gone from an elite fighting force to helpless prisoners.

The door to the room opened and two ninja entered. They all recognized one from his photos and his robes as the Hokage. They also recognized the other one.

"You, you fucking son of a bitch!" Tayuya screamed at Jiraiya.

An ANBU rushed over and punched her hard right in the stomach.

"Show the Hokage and Lord Jiraiya respect!" He shouted at her as she doubled over.

"There is no need for that." The Hokage said calmly. He slowly and deliberately lit his pipe and took a couple puffs as the prisoners eyed him nervously. He took the pipe back out and continued. "I will make this quick. Having come to this village with the sole purpose of doing harm I hereby sentence you all to death." He turned to one of the ANBU. "Take them up to the courtyard and execute them."

"Hai Hokage-sama!"

With that the Hokage turned to go.

"Wait!" Sakon shouted. "You can't do this!"

The Hokage turned back and eyed him curiously. "And why not?"

"We're helpless prisoners!"

Jiraiya snorted a laugh. "So? You came here to attack us kid. Do you think if you were caught in Suna or Iwa or Kumo any of them would do anything different? For that matter what would *Orochimaru* have done with prisoners?"

The four of them all looked at one another with real fear in their eyes.

"Lord Hokage," Jirobo bowed as low as his girth allowed. "I had always heard that you were a man of honor. Would an honorable man kill prisoners?"

"I did so in the third great ninja war." Sarutobi replied easily. "Every ninja understands that if he is captured he is at the mercy of his captors. Every ninja also knows that if he is taken within an enemy village, that by itself, is sufficient cause for a death sentence. Count yourselves lucky that I *am* honorable. You will not be tortured or used for experiments. You will each be given a quick clean beheading."

Jiraiya grinned at their obvious fear. "What did you think? That you could come here, destroy our homes, kill our people and just walk away? Were you expecting a kiss on the cheek?"

"We'll serve you." Kidomaru said. "We're all powerful ninja and we could be a benefit to you."

Sakon quickly nodded. "We'll do anything you want and serve you faithfully!"

Sarutobi paused and seemed to consider it. "I would never be able to trust you. You would run at the first opportunity."

"You could put tracking seals on us so we wouldn't be able to escape." Sakon offered.

Jiraiya frowned at that. "Well I could put some tracking seals on them that only a seal master could hope to remove. Since there aren't too many of us around they really wouldn't be able to escape."

The four of them suddenly looked hopeful. They all eyed Sarutobi as he puffed on his pipe again.

"Why bother?" Sarutobi asked. "These children were captured without even a fight, no doubt they are weak and not worth such trouble."

"Lord Hokage," Jirobo spoke with careful and measured tones. "We were captured so easily only because of the extraordinary pain caused by losing our curse seals."

Sakon nodded. "We were trained by Lord Orochimaru himself and are very skilled not only in combat but in creating barriers and defenses. Orochimaru-sama would never have allowed weak ninja to act as his bodyguard."

"Just take us somewhere and allow us to show you what we can do." Kidomaru pleaded.

Sarutobi shook his head. "Even if you are a bit above average I am afraid that is still not reason enough for me to spare you."

"We know all of Orochimaru's secrets!" Tayuya shouted. "We know where all the secret bases and research labs are! Spare us and we'll give you everything!"

"Tayuya!" Jirobo was shocked. "You would betray Lord Orochimaru?"

"Fuck Orochimaru! It's because of him we're in this fucking mess! Besides he's dead, we don't owe him a fucking thing anymore."

"She's right," Sakon agreed. "It's time to forget Orochimaru and save ourselves." He looked directly at the Hokage. "As his body guard we went *everywhere* with Orochimaru. We can tell you where every last hidden base is, show you if you want. We'll give you everything, all we ask is that you allow us to serve you."

"We were loyal to Orochimaru-sama until his death," Kidomaru said. "Spare us and we will be equally loyal to you."

The Hokage put the pipe back in his mouth and took several drawn out puffs as he again seemed to consider it.

"Very well," Sarutobi said. "Provided you tell us everything you know of Orochimaru's operations, and lead us to these bases, I will accept you as Genin of this village."

"You expect us to be fucking Genin?" Tayuya asked.

"Shut up Tayuya!" Sakon snapped. "Lord Hokage, your offer is a generous one and we gladly accept."

Jiraiya placed tacking seals on each of their backs. They were then taken to individual interrogation sessions. They provided a wealth of information.

Late that evening Sarutobi and Jiraiya were in his office looking at some of the information they had gained.

Sarutobi shook his head wearily. "I had no idea his operations were so vast. He had bases in almost every country."

"What will you do?"

"Send strike teams to liberate the camps and destroy the bases. Those four will act as guides for our people."

Jiraiya gave the man an admiring look. "You know old man, when you retire you ought to become a director. That little scene could not have played out better if you'd given them all scripts."

"They knew they really did face execution. And it is always much better to let the prisoners think they are volunteering information rather than being forced to give it up. When they believe it is their own idea they tend to be eager to reveal all, when they know they are being forced the tendency is to give as little as possible." Sarutobi paused. "None of them knew who Orochimaru summoned."

Jiraiya nodded. "That's a relief."

Sarutobi nodded. "You and I are the only ones who know the truth. I think it would be for the best that it remain that way."

Jiraiya nodded. "I don't like taking credit for something I didn't do, but I agree. I can just imagine what it would do to people if they heard the Yondaime had been brought back."

"There is also another very important matter I wanted to discuss with you." Sarutobi said.

"What's that?"

"I've been thinking about my retirement and who should succeed me."

There was a pounding on his front door.

Naruto slowly opened his eyes and focused. There was light pouring through his bedroom window. Glancing at his alarm clock it read 10:37. He sat up in bed and stretched and let out a long yawn. He *never* slept in late; he was always up early ready to do things. He really must have been wiped out from yesterday's events.

He was remembering that Kakashi-sensei had actually carried him home. He also remembered throwing his jumpsuit into the garbage. He would never get all that blood out. Fortunately he had three more exactly like it. He had managed to take a hot shower and then crashed into his bed.

The pounding continued from the door without let up. "I'm coming already, hold on." He tossed aside his blankets and got up out of bed. He walked past the piles of clothes and discarded cups of instant ramen that littered the floor. He had on a pair of cheery orange boxers and a T shirt that had, 'Future Hokage' printed on it. He stumbled to the door and opened it.

"Naruto-kun!" A happy and relieved shout greeted him. Before he could even respond the girl leapt onto his chest and glomped on. He was knocked to the floor with a teary eyed Hinata pressing herself against him.

"Hi... Hinata? Hinata what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

She looked up at him smiling and quickly wiped away her tears. "Oh, I'm sorry, ninja aren't supposed to cry I know. It's just that I was so worried about you. I wanted to come see you but I was ordered to go directly home when I was finally relieved. I tried calling you but all the phone lines are out. I couldn't stand not knowing if you were all right. I finally got permission to leave the estates and I came here as fast as I could."

He looked at the girl and felt his heart thudding in his chest. "You cried for me?" He said in a small voice.

She nodded, feeling embarrassed at showing such weakness in front of him. She was taken by surprise as his arms suddenly wrapped around her and pulled her down tight.

"Thank you," he whispered in her ear, his voice threatening to crack. In his whole miserable life the only other person to have shed tears for him had been Iruka. For that, he would always love Iruka.

And now he knew that he would always love Hinata as well.

A green vest

Hinata didn't understand why Naruto held her so tight for so long. Or why he seemed on the verge of tears. It was enough for her that she was in his arms. She just shut her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of being with Naruto-kun.

Sasuke opened his eyes to find himself in an unfamiliar room.

"Sasuke-kun!" Sakura was suddenly hugging him. "You're finally awake!"

He didn't like being touched, and he especially didn't like being mauled. "Sakura let go of me." His words were chilly.

She immediately did as he asked and stood back. The cold look in his eyes hurt her. *I only wanted him to know I was glad he was all right.*

He looked about and quickly recognized where he was. "Why am I in the hospital?"

"Something happened to your curse seal and you passed out. Ino and I got you here as fast as we could."

He gave her an odd look. "The two of you didn't take advantage of me while I was unconscious did you?"

"WHAT?!"

He shook his head. "Never mind."

"I can't believe you would even think that!"

Flashback

They were going over the roof tops headed towards the hospital. Ino suddenly signaled for a stop. They carefully put Sasuke down on a roof.

"What are you doing?" Sakura demanded. "We have to get Sasuke-kun to the hospital!"

"Relax forehead, his pulse and heartbeat are both strong. He's just unconscious." Ino suddenly had a wicked grin. "Do you want to kiss him?"

Sakura immediately turned red. Inside her Inner Sakura gave an immediate reply. **Hell yes!** "What's the matter with you Ino pig? You can't kiss him like that, it would be wrong."

"But forehead, you know what he's like. He might never kiss anyone! Or it might be twenty years, after he's killed Itachi and is ready to rebuild his clan."

No way am I waiting twenty years to kiss that boy! Let me at him! Inner Sakura began making smooching sounds. "I'm sure he'll kiss me when he's ready."

Ino frowned. "And just what makes you think he'll end up kissing you forehead girl?"

Sakura crossed her arms and tried to sound smug. "Who else would he kiss?"

"How about someone who is actually pretty and doesn't have a monstrous forehead? Like, oh I don't know, me?"

Sakura barked a laugh. "Like that will ever happen! Now come on, let's get him to the hospital."

Shrugging Ino slung one arm over her shoulders while Sakura got the other. They were soon headed towards the hospital again.

Meanwhile Inner Sakura was shouting. ***No! No! No! Just knock Ino out and then we can ravish Sasuke!***

"I should have listened," she mumbled to herself.

"What was that?" Sasuke asked.

"Nothing! Nothing at all."

"You're acting weirder than usual Sakura." He tossed aside his blankets and jumped out of bed. He was wearing a hospital gown but he could see his clothes had been neatly folded and placed on a chair. "I'm getting dressed and getting out of here."

"I don't think you're supposed to do that until a doctor releases you." Sakura said.

"I'm fine, and besides I'm not taking up a room when there are real wounded people here." He picked up his dark blue shirt, and was about to take off the hospital gown when he saw Sakura still standing there. "Do you mind?"

"Oh, right, well since you're feeling better I suppose I'll go. By the way, Kakashi-sensei stopped by earlier. All the Genin teams are being ordered to meet at the tower at noon."

He nodded. "I'll be there."

"All right. I guess I'll go let Naruto know."

When Naruto finally let go of her and they both stood up, they both began to feel embarrassed. Hinata only now realized just how little Naruto was wearing and her face immediately turned red. What Naruto suddenly realized was what a mess his apartment was. There were clothes and empty ramen cups everywhere, dirty dishes were stacked in the sink, and the bathroom... he really didn't want to

think about the bathroom. He normally never even noticed the condition of his apartment. But having Hinata here changed all that.

Grinning he rubbed the back of his head nervously. "Ah, sorry about the mess, I wasn't expecting anyone."

Blushing she looked down and began to press her index fingers together. "Oh it's all right Naruto-kun."

"Hinata-chan, could you maybe wait outside and give me just five minutes to get dressed and clean up a little?"

"If I came at a bad time Naruto-kun I can just..."

"No," he quickly reached out and took hold of her hands. "I am very, very, happy that you came Hinata-chan. I want you to stay, but I just need five minutes. Please?"

Her face was as red as a tomato. He wanted her to stay. She couldn't get any words out so she nodded her head and stepped outside.

As soon as the door was shut he ran through some hand signs and created twenty clones. "You guys know what to do!" He bolted for the bathroom and a speedy shower.

The clones meanwhile broke out the cleaning supplies and got busy picking things up and cleaning. The garbage was already overflowing and the clones soon had two more bags stuffed. The laundry hamper was also hidden beneath a small mountain of clothes. The bed got made, the dishes got washed and put away, he even had his little vacuum cleaner start early on its annual cleaning run. As soon as he exited the bathroom three brave clones went in to do what they could. The full garbage bags went out the bedroom window and straight down to a waiting dumpster. Clones dusted and quickly had the air filled with dust. One clone ran about with an air freshener desperately trying to cover up the overpowering odor of sweat and ramen.

By the time the original had a clean (well relatively clean) orange jumpsuit on the apartment actually looked livable. Except for the bathroom, the brave clones had done what they could, but there were limits. He shut the door and prayed Hinata didn't have to use it. After the promised five minutes he opened the apartment door and welcomed an amused looking Hinata back inside.

He gave her a twenty second tour of his apartment. He wanted to make something for them to eat but had to confess that all he had was tea and instant ramen. Hinata then surprised him.

"Give me one second." She told him. Before he could argue she went out the door. Just a few seconds later she came back in holding a cake under a little plastic cover.

He had a huge smile on his face. "Hinata-chan, you brought cake!"

She set the cake down on his little table, and then surprised him again by shaking her head. "It's not from me Naruto-kun."

He looked at her blankly. "Who's it from then?"

Giggling she headed towards the door again. "Come on and see for yourself."

Stepping outside his apartment he was surprised to find a small pile of items on either side of his door. There were flowers and cards, dozens of them. There were a couple more cakes and a few paper plates with cookies under plastic wrap.

"Hinata-chan, what is all this?"

She had a huge smile. "These are gifts Naruto-kun, gifts from the people of Konoha. They're thanking you for what you did yesterday."

Naruto looked at all the flowers, cards, and baked goods. "These are for me?" he said in a small voice. He literally had trouble believing it.

Part of him wanted to start dancing and shouting. But a bigger part was nervous, he half expected some sort of trick. When he was little he'd learned the hard way why you should never take candy from strangers.

Fortunately his healing ability seemed to make him immune to poison.

"Is something wrong Naruto-kun?" She'd been expecting a much bigger reaction. Instead he was just standing there looking at all the gifts.

"Oh, nothing, I'm just sort of amazed I guess. I'm not used to gifts."

"Well you deserve them Naruto-kun." She said happily. "We should bring them inside."

He nodded weakly. "Right."

While he made some tea Hinata got out some newly cleaned plates and a kitchen knife. She quickly had the cake sliced up and a large piece sitting on each plate. Naruto was a little nervous about eating food that had been left outside his door. Once the tea was ready he brought the cake up to his nose and actually sniffed it. He had a strong sense of smell, though it was nowhere near an Inuzuka's.

"Well, I think it's all right." He said as he sat down and grabbed a fork.

"Well of course it is Naruto-kun." Hinata smiled playfully. "Do you think someone would poison it?" Since she began eating she obviously had no doubts.

Naruto knew better than to think everyone who lived in the village was so benign. But he didn't share his doubts; there was no reason to upset her. He took a bite. "Mmmm, lemon cake, it's pretty good. I prefer chocolate, but this is really good."

As they ate she looked over to him. "Naruto-kun, when was the last time you had a home cooked meal?"

"Oh I eat at home all the time Hinata-chan."

"So you know how to cook?"

He shook his head. "Not really, but I can boil water and put things in the microwave."

She didn't like the sound of that. "Well when was the last time you had an actual meal?"

He thought about it. "Well, hmmm, I guess never. I mean I've had Iruka and the old man treat me to some good meals, but those are always out.

"So you have *never* had a home cooked meal?"

He thought about it some more. "Well I guess when I was still living in the orphanage you could count those meals."

She shook her head. "Naruto-kun, the next time we are together I am making you a nice dinner."

"Hinata-chan," Naruto said in surprise. "You don't need to go to the trouble."

"It's no trouble Naruto-kun; it would make me very happy to cook for you."

As they slowly relaxed and ate they talked about the events of the past 24 hours. Naruto got to tell her how amazing she had been in defeating Temari. He told her about all the various fights and evacuations he and his clones had taken part in. (He was careful to leave out some of the gorier details.) Though he was still not the most observant guy in the world when it came to women, he did pick

up on the look of hero worship in her eyes. It was a bit embarrassing to him, but kind of nice.

She told him about her own less grueling experience. She didn't think it compared in any way to what he had done, but Naruto wanted to hear about it. So she had told him about helping people to reach the shelters and then guarding one of the entrances with Shino. She told him of her relief at hearing that Kiba and his group had all made it back. She also told him that Sasuke had gone to the hospital after passing out, but was all right.

"He passed out?" Naruto chuckled with glee. *Oh the teme's never living that one down!*

He was going to get more details when there was a knock at the door.

"Wow, two visitors in one day. I must be getting popular." As he got up from the table he noticed the time was 11:35. Had it already been an hour? It felt more like ten minutes, time with Hinata just seemed to fly by. He opened the door to see his pink haired teammate standing there. "Oh hey Sakura-chan, what are you doing here?" She had never been to his home before.

"Hey Naruto, I came over to let you know we have a meeting at tower at twelve. We should..." She suddenly cut off as she saw Hinata come up to the door. "Hinata?" She looked at the two of them. "Were you two on a date?"

"Not really," Naruto informed her. "Hinata came over because she was worried about me and we've just been hanging out." Naruto turned to smile at his girlfriend and Sakura could see Hinata blush slightly. But unlike times past she didn't seem so shy anymore.

"That's right," Hinata confirmed. "I was worried about Naruto-kun so I came over to make sure he was all right."

"Isn't she great?" Naruto said proudly.

Sakura nodded. "I'm glad you appreciate the fact that she cares about you."

He looked at her in surprise. "Of course I do Sakura-chan. Only a total heartless teme wouldn't appreciate a girl being worried about him."

"Heh," she laughed weakly. "Right, come on let's go. Hinata the meeting is for all the Genin squads so you may as well come along too."

As they left the apartment Naruto took Hinata's hand gently into his. They walked the whole way there hand in hand. Along the way Naruto noticed something. People would look at him and... and... smile. At first he thought they were smiling at Hinata. But before long it became pretty clear that they were smiling at him. Oh the smiles didn't come from everyone. Plenty of people, especially the older ones, still sent him dark looks. But for the first time that he could remember, he got more positive looks from people than he did harsh ones.

And as he walked along with his girlfriend and his teammate, he slowly began to smile back at people.

Sakura walked a little bit behind, as tended to be her habit. She noticed the improved reaction Naruto was getting, and was glad. Even if Naruto could be loud, annoying, and dumb, she was the first to admit he was a good person. But while she noticed the way strangers were looking at him, what she noticed most was the way he and Hinata were behaving. They were just walking along hand in hand without a care in the world. They didn't seem to be talking much, but they didn't seem to really need to. They were just happy to be together and comfortable around one another.

They really look like a couple. Sakura thought. It suddenly struck her that they'd been together for a full month now. That was long enough

to be considered an, 'official' couple.

Looking at them she felt an ache in her chest. It occurred to her that Hinata had exactly what she had always wanted. Hinata had a devoted boyfriend who really appreciated her and was happy to spend time together. And it was obvious just from looking at her that Hinata was completely happy with her boyfriend.

It's not fair . Sakura wailed inside. Why can't I have that with Sasuke? She was surprised when her thoughts provoked an answer. ***Simple, because Sasuke isn't Naruto.*** Inner Sakura informed her. She nodded to herself. Well of course he wasn't, Sasuke was way better than Naruto... right? And for maybe for the very first time she suddenly found herself wondering ***why*** exactly was Sasuke better. She had never wondered about that before. She had just always accepted it as a fact. She had liked him ever since the first time she'd ever seen him.

Way back when we were just starting at the academy. Her inner self reminded her. *Yes, that's right.* She could still remember seeing him back then. He had been so cute, with just the warmest most adorable smile. ***Yes, that was back when he still smiled. We haven't seen that smile in a very long time.*** That was very true. Sasuke had stopped smiling and become withdrawn and brooding, he had become 'cool.' All the girls equated his constant silence to being, 'deep.' It was just proof that he was better than all the other loud childish boys. ***That's what we thought, but what if we were wrong? What if it was just proof that he didn't want to talk to anyone?***

She didn't like the direction that thought was taking. *Hey! Don't think bad things about Sasuke-kun! Why not?* Inner Sakura asked. ***Has Sasuke become a kami where we can't even think anything negative about him? Just whose side are you on? I'm on the side that wants to stop feeling lonely and miserable all the time. I'm on the side that wants to stop feeling pathetic and worthless every time Sasuke ignores us.*** She flinched a little at her own thoughts. They were true, she wasn't happy. But she had always

assumed she wasn't happy because she didn't have Sasuke. She was certain that once she finally won him over she would be deliriously happy. But... but what if she wasn't? What if the problem wasn't being without Sasuke? What if the whole problem was trying to be with Sasuke to begin with?

I have an idea. Inner Sakura announced. ***We're really smart right? Cha! Top grades in the academy!*** She thought proudly. ***Well then, why don't we treat this like a problem on an exam and use logic to figure it out. The question is: What does Haruno Sakura really want in a boyfriend? All right.***

He should be kind.

Right, she agreed with herself.

He should be honest.

Right.

He should be dependable.

Right.

He should pay attention to us.

Right.

He should always be happy to see us.

Right.

He should be able to tell us how he feels and share his feelings.

Right.

He should treat us the way Naruto treats Hinata.

Right.

He should be like Naruto.

Right.

Heh, heh, heh.

Hey! No fair! You tricked me!

Whatever, you know it's the truth.

"Hey Sakura-chan, are you o.k.?"

"What?" Naruto and Hinata were both looking at her oddly.

"Are you o.k.?" Naruto repeated.

"Of course, why do you ask?"

"Because we're here and you were about to keep walking past."

"Oh, heh, I guess I was day dreaming. Let's go find Kakashi-sensei."

Kakashi, Asuma, Kurenai, their, teams and Neji and Tenten were escorted into the Hokage's office.

Naruto immediately jumped up and pointed at the man standing next to the Hokage. "Hey! What is that pedophile doing here?!"

"Pedophile?" Kakashi asked.

Jiraiya smacked his forehead with his hand. "Kid! Don't call me that!"

"Well you're the one who was wanting to touch my stomach you big perv!" Naruto yelled at him.

All eyes turned to the Sannin. "Why exactly were you wanting to touch Naruto's stomach?" Kurenai asked with some alarm. It was no

secret that Jiraiya was a pervert, but until now she'd never thought his perversion ran in *that* direction. "You should be aware Jiraiya-sama that molesting a child is a crime in this village."

"It wasn't like that!" Jiraiya shouted. "I was removing a seal Orochimaru had put on his belly. I happen to be a super pervert NOT a pedophile." He quickly reached into a pouch and pulled out an orange clad book. "Only a true pervert could write something like this." He said proudly."

Needless to say every member of team seven immediately recognized the book.

"Nani? You write that smut?" Sakura said in disgust.

"It's adult themed literature young lady," Jiraiya said smugly.

Naruto shook his head. "Fine then I'll just call you a pervert instead."

"Kid," Jiraiya said. "I've told you before; I'm the one and only Jiraiya the legendary Toad Sage."

"Fine then," an annoyed Naruto announced. "Your name is ero-sennin!"

"Wait a second!" Sasuke called out. "You're Jiraiya? The legendary Sannin?"

With a smug smile he nodded. "I sure am, I'm glad at least some of you kids have heard of me."

Sasuke looked up at him blankly. "I don't think I've ever been so disappointed in my whole life."

"What?!"

Sarutobi let out an annoyed cough. "I think I should inform you of the reason I have brought you all here." He looked at the Genin and smiled. "I am here to announce promotions to the rank of Chunin."

"Promotions?" Naruto looked confused. "But the finals got interrupted; doesn't that mean no one can be promoted?"

Neji looked over to him. "You really are an idiot aren't you?"

"What did you say jerk?" Naruto turned angrily towards the cool boy.

"No more than three of four Chunin are ever promoted at each of the exams. That means there are only six to eight new Chunin for all the participating villages. We have about fifty Jonin and maybe three hundred Chunin in this village alone. Given that there's no way that all the Chunin could come from the exams alone." Neji explained smoothly, not even deigning to notice Naruto's anger or Hinata's unhappy look. He did notice when Tenten touched his arm and gave him a small frown.

"Neji is right," Kakashi said. "Even if he has his own way of informing you Naruto. The Kage of every village has the right to promote whoever he sees fit at any time."

Naruto turned to the Hokage. "But what about that whole speech you gave us about friendship between the villages and maintaining balance and all that?"

"That was all true Naruto; the exams do foster friendship among the villages and help maintain a balance. A balance of the elite of each village, which is what is on display. To be promoted through the exams is considered the highest honor and achievement. However as a practical matter the village needs a certain number of Jonin and Chunin available to handle all assignments. As needed, I promote worthy Genin to the rank of Chunin and offer qualified Chunin the opportunity to take the Jonin exam. And today it is my great pleasure to give six of you promotion."

From behind his desk he pulled out a familiar green flack jacket like the ones Kakashi and Guy wore. Sarutobi came out from his desk and stood in front of Naruto holding the vest out to him. "This one is

yours Naruto. I hereby promote you to the rank of Chunin." Sarutobi gave him a pleased smile. "Congratulations, I am proud of you."

His hands trembled as he reached out and took the vest from the Hokage. It was real. "Thank you old man! Yahhooo!" He shouted happily and broke into the famous Naruto victory dance right there in front of them.

Hinata laughed happily as did Kiba, Shikamaru, and most of the others present. Sakura loudly cheered him on, really happy for him. Kakashi applauded. Sasuke smirked, but didn't hold Naruto's display of happiness against him. Neji found the display embarrassing and just shook his head.

Jiraiya took out his notebook and began scribbling. This would make a good scene.

The Hokage had five more vests to hand out.

"Congratulations Hinata-chan!" Naruto gave her a huge hug and started dancing all over again. He seemed almost as happy at her promotion as he'd been with his own.

"Way to go Hinata!" Kiba said happily.

"Your promotion is both well deserved and most appropriate; it provides me with deep emotional satisfaction to witness your exquisite triumph." Shino then gently patted her shoulder in a display of raw unbridled emotion.

"I am very proud of you Hinata." Kurenai said and gave her a hug of her own.

"Congratulations Lady Hinata," Neji said with a stiff and proper bow. He would have been amazed if the main branch Hyuga had *not* been promoted.

Hinata was not the only one on her team to be promoted.

"For heroic service on the battlefield including five confirmed kills I am pleased to promote you Kiba." Sarutobi gave him a vest.

"All right!" Kiba shouted as Akamaru barked and people congratulated him.

"Man, I can already tell this is going to be really troublesome."

"Baka!" Ino yelled at her lazy teammate. "You just got promoted you should be happy!"

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. "Yeah right, all this means is more work."

Asuma could only laugh at his favorite student's attitude. "Come on, when we get done here we're getting barbecue, my treat."

"Oh yeah!" Chouji shouted, more excited by far than the one who actually got promoted.

Neji accepted the honor with quiet dignified thanks, as was proper for a *real* ninja. He acknowledged Hinata's congratulations and appreciated those from Tenten. The others he accepted without comment.

Well at least I've finally gotten some recognition. Still, he couldn't help but look at Naruto and Hinata. The fact that those two weaklings had also been promoted left a little sour taste. *I don't care if we are all Chunin now. I will show the world that you are both inferior to me.*

When Tenten received hers Neji's praise was quiet, but sincere.

"Hey Neji, why don't we go on that date tonight? We can celebrate our promotions."

Neji nodded his agreement. "I think that would be a fine way to celebrate."

"Great! I've heard about this wonderful place called Café Miruki where the first meal for a new couple is free..."

Sasuke said nothing once the vests were all handed out. Of course he'd known he wasn't getting promoted. He was definitely good enough to be if the dobe was. The problem was he hadn't gotten the chance to show what he could do. The exams had been interrupted and then Kakashi had denied him his chance to prove what he could do in real live combat. Of the six vests given out five were battlefield promotions. If Kakashi had only trusted him it would have been six.

"So what happens now?" Sasuke asked his sensei.

Kakashi smiled beneath his mask. "We go back to training and performing missions of course."

"That's not good enough." Sasuke informed him.

Kakashi's smile slipped. He could see the anger and frustration building and was afraid that an explosion was imminent. "What do you mean Sasuke?"

"I mean exactly what I said! It's not good enough!" Sasuke shouted at him. All the talk and celebration suddenly ground to a halt and all eyes focused on him.

Kakashi looked about; this was the worst possible time and place for this. "Sasuke why don't we talk about this later?"

"No," the boy replied adamantly. "You spent a whole month training me, and for what? To dump me and take the dobe with you instead."

If you had just trusted me I'd be Chunin now."

Kakashi was a very easy going soul, and he was aware of the things Sasuke had suffered. As such he had gone a very long way to try and keep the young man happy, but there were limits. There were certain lines that were not to be crossed, ever. One of those was calling out your sensei in front of others, especially the Hokage.

Kakashi suddenly snapped the book in his hand shut and put it away. Anyone who knew Kakashi knew that was a sign that he was taking things seriously. "There were reasons for my decision Sasuke, and I stand by them." His tone was no longer lighthearted, he sounded very serious.

"Like what?"

"To put it bluntly Sasuke I was afraid you would take foolish risks simply to build a reputation. And given your current behavior I can see my decision was right."

"Oh yeah? Then why did you take the dobe with you?"

"Because by the time I assigned different missions Naruto had already killed. It was obvious to me that unlike you Sasuke he understood that a battle is no place to go looking for unnecessary risks. I trusted him to follow my orders and not take foolish chances.

"But you didn't trust me?" Sasuke asked.

"That's right," Kakashi answered. If Sasuke was determined to get some blunt answers then he would. "Naruto has his share of faults, but thinking he is more important than everyone else isn't one of them. Since we've become a team Sasuke you've obsessed more and more on acquiring power for the sake of your own revenge. That is a dangerous and very poor motivation. You're like a dog with the hold of a bone who won't let go even when he sees wolves coming; you'd sooner die than give up your hold."

"I need power." Sasuke demanded.

"So that you can go out and kill Itachi?"

"Yes! I need you to help me become powerful enough to kill him. I am an avenger, that is my purpose!"

"An avenger is not a ninja." Sarutobi said quietly drawing the angry boy's attention. "We ninja kill, but we do so in order to protect and serve this village. Is killing your brother more important to you than that?"

Sasuke did not hesitate. "Yes, it's more important to me than anything else. Itachi has to die for what he did."

"Rest assured, Itachi will be dealt with, either by you or by someone else."

The thought that someone else might kill his brother filled him with fresh rage. "No! I'm the only one who can kill him!"

"That is not your decision to make Sasuke. It is the Hokage who decides who will perform which mission."

"I have a right..."

"Enough Sasuke!" A rare flash of Sarutobi's anger silenced the boy. "I know how much you have suffered and a great many accommodations have been made for you. But you will *not* dictate to me or your sensei what you will be taught or what mission you will be assigned. Whatever else you may be Sasuke, so long as you wear the hitai-ite you are a ninja of Konohagakure. I expect that to come before all else. I believe you have spent far too much time thinking about your rights. I suggest you give some thought to your responsibilities."

He shook his head and suddenly felt very old.

"Very well," Sarutobi announced. "I think we are done here. You newly promoted Chunin will receive your new assignments as will your former teams."

"I beg pardon, Hokage-sama." Sakura spoke up timidly. "But what do you mean former teams?"

"What he means is that the dobe and the others are going on to bigger and better things." Sasuke answered feeling wounded and more than a little bitter. "Naruto is not a part of team seven anymore."

Sakura looked worriedly to Kakashi. "Is this true sensei?" As weird as it seemed she didn't want to lose Naruto. Without her ever realizing it he had become her support, he had cheered her up through the worst of times. She didn't know how she would manage without his bright smile to lighten her day. To her sorrow Kakashi was nodding.

"It is, though it's nothing to be upset about Sakura." Kakashi answered. "As a Chunin Naruto will be expected to act as a mission leader and will also be given individual assignments. We on the other hand will continue to train and go on missions for the village. As a matter of fact we will no longer be designated team seven; from now on we will be team Kakashi." He tried to sound encouraging. "You should also know that at some point we'll receive a new member to take Naruto's spot."

"So we really are losing him." She turned to look at Naruto.

"It's o.k. Sakura-chan, I'll still be around." Naruto tried to reassure her.

"That's true Sakura," Kakashi said. "We'll still see each other; it just won't be on a regular basis any more. We may even get to work together again. Speaking of which," he looked at Naruto. "I still plan on teaching you that jutsu I mentioned. We'll need to find time when we can meet and work together."

"Really?" Naruto said excitedly. Even if he was now a Chunin that didn't mean he still didn't want Kakashi to train him. "That's great, what's this jutsu called?"

"It's called rasengan, and it's a jutsu my sensei the Fourth Hokage invented."

"Actually Kakashi," Jiraiya spoke. "Why don't let me teach it to him? After all he is going to be my new apprentice."

"Your what?" Kakashi was truly surprised.

Though not as surprised as Naruto. He immediately pointed an accusing finger at the older ninja. "I knew it! You just want an excuse to be alone with me! You are a pedophile!"

Before Jiraiya could explode the Hokage dismissed everyone.

"Except you Naruto, I want you to come take a walk with me, just you and me."

The Hokage wanted to have a very important talk with the young man.

The talk

"Have you ever been up here before?" Sarutobi asked.

Naruto couldn't help but laugh. "Are you kidding old man? I come up here all the time!" They were standing atop the Hokage monument, overlooking the village. "I really like coming here at sunset. It's just beautiful!"

The Hokage nodded happily. "Oh I agree with you Naruto, I have always found the view here breathtaking."

They both stood there for a moment just enjoying the sight.

The Hokage then produced his pipe and carefully lit it. "You know Naruto; you really should be a bit more respectful to Jiraiya. You are going to be his apprentice and you do need to treat him with a certain amount of respect as your sensei."

Naruto took on a stubborn look and crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't want that pedophile for a sensei! Kakashi actually wants to teach me for once, why can't I just have him?"

The Hokage took a long puff and slowly released it. "I'm afraid the time when Kakashi was your official sensei is now over. The two of you will have different responsibilities. In any case, you should feel extremely honored to have Jiraiya as your sensei."

Naruto just shook his head. "Why do I get all the perverts for senseis?"

The Hokage chuckled.

Naruto looked up at him and frowned. "Can you just tell me *why* he should be my sensei? I mean I never even met him until a couple weeks ago and then he just wanted to jab me in the stomach."

"Naruto," the Hokage began seriously. "Jiraiya is a Sannin, and a bit of a legend both inside and outside this village."

" *That* guy?"

The Hokage nodded. "Not only is he powerful and well respected, he is also a great instructor. You do know don't you that he was the sensei of the Yondaime Hokage? If you were to be his apprentice he could teach you everything he taught the Yondaime. In addition, he is highly motivated."

"That old guy really taught the Fourth Hokage?" Naruto clearly found it hard to believe.

"He really did Naruto."

Naruto frowned and thought about it. Finally he gave a grudging nod. "Well, I guess if he was good enough to teach one Hokage he's good enough to teach another."

The Hokage eyed the young ninja carefully. "Naruto, tell me why you want to be Hokage."

"Huh?"

Sarutobi took the pipe out of his mouth and looked down at him very seriously. "I know it is your dream, but I want to know why it is. Please tell me why you want so badly to be Hokage."

"I want people to recognize me." Naruto answered without a second's thought. "I want to be acknowledged and have the villagers not look at me with hatred in their eyes." He paused. "But you know, I think that's finally starting to happen. I think people are finally starting to really see me."

"Are they?" Hearing Naruto say that pleased him greatly. The boy had not deserved the neglect and cruelty he'd received growing up.

The thought that the villagers were finally beginning to see him as a person and ninja rather than as a demon gave him hope.

"People left some gifts outside my door. At first I thought it had to be a trick. They left some food and I figured it was probably poisoned." The matter of fact way Naruto said that made Sarutobi grimace. "But it wasn't, they really were just gifts. And on the way here a lot of people smiled at me." Naruto was still trying to get used to the idea that maybe; just maybe, the whole village didn't hate him anymore.

Seeing just how much just a little recognition meant to him made Sarutobi wonder if things had been even worse for Naruto than he's imagined. "Do you ever hate them?" Sarutobi asked quietly.

"What?"

"Do you ever hate them Naruto?" Sarutobi clarified. "Certainly if anyone had the right to it would be you. Do you imagine becoming Hokage and punishing them one day for the way they treated you?"

Naruto looked shocked and quickly shook his head. "Never! I want to win their respect and make them see me. I don't want to punish them. I want to be like you old man. I want to be fair and just and always protect the village. And I want people to respect me for it, the same way they do you."

Sarutobi was very good at reading people, and he believed him. *He truly is a worthy candidate, I am so relieved.* "You have no idea how glad I am to hear that Naruto." He turned from the boy to once more look out over the village. "Naruto, do you know how old I was when I became Hokage?"

"Nope."

"I was your age, just thirteen."

"Wow! That must have been like a really long time ago then!"

The Hokage couldn't help but laugh. "Yes, it was. The village has grown and changed quite a lot in that time. Whole generations have been born. I have seen many fine people come and go, yet with each new life the village grows and becomes more." He looked back at Naruto. "Do you know that I was the student of the Nidaime Hokage? Both he and his brother the Shodai brought me to this very spot to inform me I was to be the Sandaime. Do you know what they said to me?"

Naruto shook his head. "No, what?" He was eager to hear.

The Hokage smiled as his eyes seemed to take on a far away look. "Each and every Konoha comrade is a part of my own body. The villagers believe in me and I believe in all of them. That is what being Hokage means. You must love the village and protect those who trust in you. Then you must nurture them, those to whom you can entrust the future." Sarutobi looked away again as memories of his teacher and of the great Shodai flooded back. For just a moment he remembered *exactly* what it had been like. To be thirteen and to be told by two of the greatest ninja alive that you were to be Hokage.

"That is what it means to be Hokage, Naruto." He said quietly as he looked out over the village. "You must love and protect the people. You must give everything for them. Do you still wish to be Hokage?"

He didn't understand what was happening, or how things had gotten so serious. But somehow Naruto knew that this was a very important question. "Yes," his voice shook just a bit. "I want to be the one to protect them."

"Very well," Sarutobi turned around to face Naruto once more. "As you like to point out Naruto, I am a very old man. I retired more than a decade ago and since returning I have grown very weary with the demands of my position. I have decided to retire again, this time for good. But I will wait three more years to give my successor the time he needs to grow into the man who can replace me. It will not be easy." Sarutobi warned. "It will require a huge commitment and total dedication. The Hokage must be acknowledged as the strongest

ninja in the village. You have three years to become that, and to prove yourself a worthy leader."

Naruto gulped, suddenly feeling very nervous. "What do you mean?"

A ghost of a smile touched the Hokage's lips. "In three years time, if I judge you worthy, you will be Hokage."

Hiashi gave them both a simple nod of approval. "I am very pleased with both of you. Your promotions do our clan honor."

"Thank you father," Hinata said.

"Arigato Hiashi-sama," Neji said, stiff and proud.

"I expect both of you to work very hard and to become Jonin before too long." Hiashi informed them.

Hinata wanted to groan, but knew better. She had actually hoped her promotion might earn her a short respite. She really should have known better.

Neji thought nothing of Hiashi's expectations. He wanted to be a Jonin soon for his own reasons. "Hiashi-sama, with your permission, I would like to be free tonight. I intend to have a date with Tenten."

Hiashi nodded immediately. "Of course, I think you and she make a fine couple." He had met the girl before and approved of her. She was a fine ninja and might make a fine wife for Neji one day.

"Arigato, Hiashi-sama." Then Neji turned to Hinata and spoke in an innocent voice. "And will you be seeing your boyfriend Naruto tonight, Lady Hinata?"

She snapped her head around and stared at her cousin. He'd done it on purpose! Nothing he had ever done, not even his behavior at the preliminaries, had even been so deliberately cruel.

"Boyfriend?" Hiashi frowned and turned his full attention to his daughter. "What is Neji talking about?"

Hinata looked up into her father's face and braced herself. "Uzumaki Naruto and I have been dating for the past month, ever since the day after the preliminaries."

Hiashi did not begin shouting at her, that was not his way. He was the clan head of the Hyuga, and as such he was always restrained and dignified, even in private. But the frown and the darkening of his face was enough to tell his daughter he was furious. "Did I extend you permission to date anyone Hinata?"

She gulped. "No father, but I..."

"You are the oldest daughter of the Hyuga main branch. You are the nearest thing this village has to a princess. Who you are seen with affects not only your own status but that of the entire clan. I forbid you to see or speak to this boy ever again. He is beneath you and not worthy of your time"

"Father you don't even know him." Hinata protested.

"I know of him, and that is quite enough. My decision is final; you will not see that boy again."

Neji grinned.

Hinata saw that and would remember. She looked at her father's face. "No," her voice was firm; there was no weakness or tremble to it at all.

A look of surprise filled Hiashi's face. She had never once uttered a word of defiance to him. "What did you say?"

"I said no father; I will not stop seeing him. I love him and I want to be with him even if it is without your approval."

He stared at her in complete shock. "Love? What does a thirteen year old child know of love?" Hiashi demanded.

"I know that he cares for me and would never ever, hurt me. When I look at him I feel courage and when I am with him I am happy. I have never been as happy as I have been in the short time we have been together, and I refuse to give up being with him."

"Whatever you may *think* you feel that boy is completely unworthy of you! He is lower than the dirt."

"He is going to be Hokage one day!" She shot back. She really couldn't stand it when people insulted him, even her own father. She could stand anything directed at her, but she refused to let others insult him. "He killed fifty enemy ninja in the battle yesterday and was promoted by the Hokage to Chunin just as we were. If you think our promotions were impressive then you must think the same of his! He is much stronger ninja than either me or Neji and more than worthy of me." Honestly, she always wondered if she was worthy of him.

"That weakling is not better than me!" Neji snapped. "How dare you even suggest such a thing?"

Hinata looked at him and refused to back down an inch. "You killed fifteen enemy ninja yesterday. I know because you haven't stopped bragging about it. Well Naruto killed fifty, so I think that would make him at least three times the ninja you are."

"He truly killed fifty enemy ninja?" Hiashi asked.

Hinata could hear the doubt and answered firmly. "He did, and he was promoted for it. The Hokage also announced that he was to be apprenticed to the great Jiraiya." She wasn't sure what to make of the man and the weird claims against him, but she knew his reputation. "Isn't that just the sort of ninja I should be with?"

Hiashi stopped for a moment and considered. He knew what was in Naruto of course, but was intelligent enough to understand the jailer was not the prisoner. His main objection was not that Naruto had the Kyuubi. In his eyes access to such a power was a plus. No, his objection was that the boy was an orphan and a troublemaker. Surely such a boy would never amount to anything.

And yet...

To have killed that many enemy ninja truly was extraordinary, a feat certainly deserving of promotion. He had wondered at the sudden vast improvement his daughter had shown in the past month. He had naturally assumed his own influence to have been responsible for it. But was it possible that this boy had, had some influence on her as well? He had never imagined his frail daughter would ever have the strength to actually oppose him. Yet here she was, showing courage in her defiance of him. Was the boy really responsible for that too? And he was apprenticed to Jiraiya? Any ninja in the village would kill for such an opportunity. Why would the Hokage and Jiraiya arrange that?

Hiashi came to a decision.

"I want to meet this boy and talk to him. Invite him to dinner tonight."

"Yes father."

Neji left Hiashi's study amazed that Naruto would actually be allowed to have dinner here. He consoled himself with the thought that the loud, rude, orange loving baka would quickly find himself thrown into the street. And Hinata would probably be betrothed and locked in her room until she turned 16 and old enough to marry.

"Neji."

He came to a halt and turned around to look at his cousin. That she was angry was obvious. He couldn't help but smirk. "I am sorry for

the trouble I caused you and your boyfriend. It must have slipped out."

"Nothing you say ever slips out." Hinata stated. "Every word is always deliberate and calculated. You said that with the intent of breaking Naruto and me up."

"If you say so," he replied calmly. It was true and it wasn't important enough to bother denying.

"Neji," she spoke slowly and deliberately. "I have never done anything to hurt you, with the exception of activating your seal. And for that I sincerely apologized to you."

He frowned. "Are you expecting an apology from me?"

She shook her head. "No, an apology would be pointless. You deliberately tried to ruin my relationship with Naruto, and for that I will never forgive you." She walked past him and said three words that were deliberate and calculated.

"I hate you."

The bargain

Naruto was trying not to jump up and down in frustration. "But why can't I tell anyone?" He began whining. "Can't I just tell Iruka-sensei of Hinata-chan?"

Jiraiya and Sarutobi both shook their heads. Following their talk the Hokage had taken Naruto to a house in one of Konoha's better neighborhoods. There Jiraiya had been waiting for them.

"I have already told you Naruto," Sarutobi said patiently. "That my intentions must remain a secret. Only the three of us know what I plan, and that is how it must remain."

"But why?" Naruto complained. This had been his dream ever since he'd first learned what a Hokage was. His natural instinct was to tell everyone.

"Because, though it pains me to say it, there are still many in this village who would oppose my plan. Were I to announce it publicly they would spend the next three years trying to undermine you."

Naruto wanted to argue, but he knew how right the Hokage was. Even if people were starting to come around, he knew that didn't mean everyone.

"Listen kid," Jiraiya said. "Just look at it as a test. A Hokage has to be able to keep secrets, even ones he really wants to share. This will just be a test of your ability to be trusted with classified information."

Naruto was reminded of the Forest of Death and his decision to look at the scroll in violation of orders. It was ironic to think that traitor Kabuto had saved him from disaster. He slowly nodded and reigned himself in. "All right I get it."

"Good Naruto," Sarutobi said in a deep and serious tone. "Because if you *do* tell anyone that will automatically disqualify you."

"Are you kidding old man?" Naruto looked at the Hokage in surprise. "You'd do that?"

Sarutobi nodded. "Yes I would Naruto. This is no child's game; if you are serious about becoming Hokage then you will need to prove yourself in all sorts of ways. Understand this Naruto; all I have given you is the opportunity, nothing more. If in three years time I am not convinced you are the best possible candidate, then I will not select you."

Naruto grinned fearlessly. "Don't worry old man, in three years I'll be a really powerful ninja."

"That's only part of it kid." Jiraiya said.

"What do you mean? What else is there?" Naruto demanded.

"A Hokage is a leader, not just a great ninja." Jiraiya said. "You'll need to prove your ability to lead others and to make good decisions."

"You will also have to learn to be much more diplomatic than you are now." Sarutobi warned.

"What do you mean? What's wrong with the way I am now?" Naruto asked.

"Kid, if you go around calling foreign lords or other Kages perverts then before long Konoha will be without business and likely at war." Jiraiya said.

Naruto looked stubborn. "You expect me to lie and kiss up to people?"

"Sometimes," Jiraiya nodded. "Lies are the grease that keeps society running smoothly."

"Grease is nasty and disgusting." Naruto said.

"That's true kid," Jiraiya said. "But any piece of machinery without some will grind to a halt before long."

"Naruto," Sarutobi said. "You are going to discover that not everything a Hokage does is fun or glorious." He frowned a bit. "I have not even mentioned paper work yet. The fact is a large part of what I do is simply acting as the face of the village. When people meet with me I am not simply one man, but in a way I *am* Konoha. Everything I do or say will reflect upon the village."

"And do you really want people connecting Konoha with someone who goes around calling everyone pervert?" Jiraiya asked.

"Hey ero-sennin, I'm just being honest." Naruto said.

"That is not necessarily a good thing Naruto. A large part of being ninja is deception." Sarutobi said. "I have met many important people I did not like or trust. But I was just as friendly to them as anyone else. Tell me Naruto, would I have been better served by letting them know my true feelings?"

Naruto shook his head. "No." He knew about deception and not showing what you really thought. He could talk about being honest, but the smiling confident face that he showed the world was a lie. He had grown up lonely and miserable, and had learned early on not to show it. He smiled and acted sure of himself, when deep down he had always wondered why people treated him the way they did. He had always assumed that there had to be something wrong with him when *everyone* seemed to hate him. But he never ever showed anyone that self doubt. "I think I understand."

"Well that's good." Jiraiya said. "So tell me kid, what do you think of this house?"

Jiraiya had given him a quick tour. It had three bedrooms, two baths, a huge kitchen, and a large fenced off yard that even had a pool and Jacuzzi. "It's really great," Naruto replied honestly.

"Glad to hear it." He reached into a pocket and tossed out some keys. "'Cause it's yours now."

Naruto caught the keys automatically. "Say what?"

"No apprentice of mine is living in some crappy hole in the wall apartment." Jiraiya said.

Naruto gave the older man a suspicious look. "Well no way am I living with you, you dirty old man." He tossed the keys back.

Jiraiya caught them and glared. "I've told you before kid I'm not that way. I happen to own four houses in this village. And I haven't lived in any of them for thirteen years; they're just investments to me. I won't be living here, this place will be yours." He tossed the keys back.

Naruto caught them and tossed them back again. "I don't want it."

Starting to get a bit annoyed Jiraiya threw the keys back a bit harder. "Why? You prefer living in that dump you call home now?"

Naruto didn't appreciate the dig and threw the keys straight back as hard as he could. "I don't need anybody's pity."

"It's not pity you idiot! I have four houses that are empty; it would be plain stupid for you to keep living in a crap trap when you can live here." Jiraiya flicked his wrist back and threw the keys in the way he would have thrown a kunai.

Catching the flying metal Naruto actually winced slightly with pain. "My apartment's been good enough until now." He was about to throw the keys back when Sarutobi caught his wrist.

"That's true Naruto," Sarutobi agreed. "But wouldn't you rather meet with Hinata and other friends here rather than at your current home?"

Naruto frowned. He remembered how embarrassed he'd felt when Hinata first came over. This place was a few steps above his apartment. Hinata would probably like it better. He sighed. "You don't play fair old man."

Sarutobi released his wrist with a grin. "That is just one more skill you will need to learn."

"Anyway, don't feel too guilty kid, you'll be paying rent."

Sarutobi immediately turned and gave his student a look.

"Err, a small rent."

Sarutobi kept looking at him.

Jiraiya coughed. "Ah, you know what kid? Why don't you stay here rent free?"

"I think that would be a fine idea." Sarutobi agreed.

Naruto chuckled a little. "So old man, you going to show me how to guilt people into doing things?"

Right then the door bell rang. Jiraiya opened it.

Hinata immediately bowed to the man. "Pardon me Jiraiya-sama, but I was told Naruto was here?"

"Hey Hinata-chan." Naruto came over to greet her.

"Naruto-kun," without even waiting to be invited in she rushed up to Naruto and grabbed a hold of him. Naruto was caught off guard by how forward she was being. "Naruto-kun I need to talk to you."

"Is it important Hinata?" Sarutobi asked. "There were a few things Jiraiya and I were wanting to discuss with him."

Surprised to see the Hokage there as well she bowed to him. "I beg pardon Hokage-sama, but it is very important. May I have just a few minutes alone with Naruto, please?"

Sarutobi nodded and pointed to a door.

"What's going on Hinata-chan?" Naruto asked.

"In private," she insisted. She dragged him into the room and shut the door.

Sarutobi could see the look on his student's face and shook his head. "Don't even think it, they're only thirteen."

Jiraiya chuckled. "She's probably telling him that they've been apart for hours and that she misses him."

Their conversation came to an abrupt end as they heard a high pitched girlish wail come from the room.

"WHAT?!" came the girlish cry. It was followed almost immediately by a loud, 'thump.'

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata's shouted.

Both men immediately hurried to the door and opened it. There lying unconscious on the floor was Naruto with Hinata kneeling over him.

"What happened here?" Sarutobi demanded.

Hinata looked up guiltily. "I just told him something."

"What could you say that could make him react like that?" Jiraiya asked.

"My father insists on meeting him tonight at dinner."

"Ah, yeah, that would do it." Jiraiya said.

When Naruto came to Hinata explained to him what had happened. Naruto immediately swore to beat the crap out of Neji. Naruto expected Hinata to tell him not to, but to his surprised she just nodded her head.

"We only have a few hours to get you ready." Hinata informed him.

Naruto had been in the middle of war. He had faced down Orochimaru in single combat. He had faced angry mobs crying for his blood. He thought he'd known what fear was. But the thought of having to face Hiashi made him want to shake and run for cover.

"Hinata-chan, I don't think I can do this. I've never been invited to someone's home before. I don't know anything about how to behave through a formal dinner."

"Naruto-kun you can do this! All you have to do is behave the way you did on our first date. When we're eating just pay attention to me and do what I do." Hinata said.

"Your dad is going to hate me." Naruto said with a glum certainty.

"No he won't," Hinata insisted. "My father is a hard and formal man, but he is also fair. Just do your best Naruto-kun and I'm sure everything will work out fine."

"I believe Jiraiya and I can help as well." Sarutobi said.

Hiashi and Hinata were waiting in the private dining room just at six as the servant approached. Hiashi was surprised to see more than one guest trailing her.

"Hiashi-sama," the woman spoke at the entrance to the dining room. "May I present Uzumaki Naruto, Lord Jiraiya, and the Lord Hokage." The woman smoothly withdrew and left the five of them in the ornate room.

Hiashi immediately bowed to the two men. "Your presence here honors me Hokage-sama, Jiraiya-sama, I had not expected you."

In turn both the Hokage and Jiraiya returned the bows. "I hope you do not object to our being here." The Hokage said. "I am the nearest thing Naruto has to a guardian and thought it only proper that I be present."

Jiraiya smiled. "Since Naruto here is my new apprentice I just thought I should come watch out for him. Besides," Jiraiya chuckled. "I'm not one to pass up the chance at a free meal."

Naruto stepped forward and gave Hiashi a deep bow. The usual orange jump suit was gone. He had on his long black leather jacket, a cream colored shirt, and dark brown pants. Hinata had picked out what to wear and told him what he should say. "Hiashi-sama I sincerely thank you for your hospitality in inviting me here. You honor me greatly and I hope to prove worthy of your great kindness."

Hiashi was surprised at how well the boy was behaving. From everything he'd heard he'd expected to him to be walking on the ceiling with a can of spray paint in his hand.

"We will see." Hiashi said neutrally. "If you are ready, dinner is prepared."

The five of them sat at one end of a long dining table. Hiashi had intended to have Naruto sitting right next to him, but etiquette required he give the two closest seats to the Hokage and Jiraiya. Naruto and Hinata sat across from each other at the next set of chairs. Hiashi did not immediately begin questioning Naruto. He decided to bide his time. Through the meal he spoke mostly with the Hokage and Jiraiya, almost completely ignoring the two children.

At least he seemed to be ignoring them. He kept a careful eye on both of them throughout. It was clear early on that Naruto had no idea as to what the proper etiquette was of eating a formal meal. He could see how he copied Hinata in placing his napkin and in

determining which utensil to use for the salad or the soup. Naruto was an orphan so it was understandable that he did not have the best manners. But it was obvious the boy was trying very hard.

Something else was obvious as well. Hinata was smiling. It had been a very long time since he'd seen his daughter smile so much. But it seemed as though every time she looked at the boy her mood lightened. He again wondered if it was Naruto that had brought on his daughter's recent changes.

Hiashi patiently waited until the main meal was cleared away and they were awaiting the cake, then he struck.

"Naruto," Hiashi said. "Can you please tell me your intentions towards my daughter?"

Naruto looked at him nervously. He knew he was on his own. The Hokage and Jiraiya had come to show their support, but he needed to answer on his own. "My only intentions are to spend time with her, Hiashi-sama."

"You mean as a friend?"

Naruto gulped. "Ah, no."

"If not as a friend, then in what manner do you wish to spend time with her?"

Though Hiashi's byakugan was not active his pale eyes seemed to bore into him. Naruto steadied himself and answered. "As her boyfriend."

There was a very long drawn out pause. The silence was complete as Hiashi slowly sat back in his seat, his eyes never leaving Naruto.

"I see," Hiashi finally said. "And is it true that you have been seeing her in this manner for a full month's time now?"

"Hai," Naruto answered.

"And why did you not first ask permission to date my daughter?"

"Hiashi-sama, I did not know that was required. I asked Hinata and she wanted to go out with me, I thought that was enough."

Hiashi frowned and Naruto began feeling almost sick. "Hinata is no ordinary girl. She is the eldest daughter of the Hyuga main branch, and as such is likely to be the next clan head. I have had offers for her hand in marriage from the time of her birth. I have also received an untold number of requests for formal dates. I have refused them all; I have never intended her to date anyone except her future husband. Tell me Naruto, *why* should I allow you a privilege that I have denied to princes and lords?"

Naruto pulled back his chair and stood up. He then bowed to the man. "Hiashi-sama, if I have offended you then for that I truly apologize and am sorry. As for why you should let me be with her I can only tell you this. Your daughter is more precious to me than my own life. I feel truly special when I am with her, and even though it hasn't been that long I would be miserable and heart broken if I couldn't be with her. Hiashi-sama, I swear to you that I would never hurt your daughter or allow her to be hurt. I would give my life to protect her."

Hiashi listened to the earnest plea, but slowly shook his head. "I am afraid that is not good enough. While I can see by your body language that you mean every word it is not sufficient. Even if you do care deeply for my daughter, I am afraid you are not the sort who can be with her."

"It's because of what's inside me isn't it?" He looked down at the table and felt bitterness threaten to completely overwhelm him. *It's not fair! Why am I being punished for this AGAIN?*

Sarutobi and Jiraiya looked a bit worried but Hiashi answered smoothly. "No, whatever you might think it has nothing to do with *that*. "

Hinata was a bit confused, wondering what exactly her father and Naruto meant.

"Then why?" Naruto demanded. His self control beginning to fray a bit. He had finally found someone who really accepted him, and he was happy. Now someone else was threatening to take away his precious person. "Why am I not good enough?"

"Because you have no clan, no money, and no power. As head of the Hyuga clan I will decide who my daughter marries. And whoever that person will be he will either be a very wealthy man or a very powerful ninja."

"Well I'm going to be Hokage one day." Naruto proclaimed. "Isn't that good enough?"

Again Hiashi shook his head. "Claims are very easy to make. If I truly believed you would be a Hokage one day then certainly you would have my blessing."

Naruto looked pleadingly at Sarutobi, but the Hokage gave no reaction at all.

"You know," Jiraiya spoke up. "You might not want to dismiss the kid's claim so easily. I was sensei to the Yondaime and I know potential when I see it. I think Naruto has as much potential as the Yondaime did, and I intend to teach him all the Yondaime's jutsus."

A slight grin touched Hiashi's lips. "Except for the Hiraishin of course."

Jiraiya shrugged. "Well of course."

"What's the hiraishin?" Naruto asked curiously. "And why won't you teach it to me?"

"It was the Yondaime's signature jutsu, his own creation, and his masterpiece." Jiraiya sounded almost wistful. "It was what made him

a ninja legend and the Yellow Flash of Konoha. That one jutsu was so powerful it allowed him to defeat entire armies by himself."

"Cool," Naruto said. "Why won't you teach it to me?"

"It's not that I won't teach it to you kid, it's that I can't. No one else was ever able to make it work. Minato tried teaching it to me but I could never pick it up. Even that genius Orochimaru tried to copy it but failed."

Hiashi nodded. "Only a truly great ninja could ever hope to master the hiraishin."

Naruto looked at Hiashi. "If I could learn that jutsu would I be good enough to be with Hinata?"

Hiashi looked at the boy. "Yes, if you could work the hiraishin I would acknowledge you worthy of my daughter."

"That's it then! I'm learning this jutsu!"

Jiraiya just shook his head. "Kid, you're writing checks with your mouth that your body can't cash. There's no way you could learn that jutsu if I couldn't. Even if you could somehow it would take you years."

Naruto looked back at Hiashi. He couldn't be without Hinata for years, that was too cruel. He wracked his brain to come up with some possible way to be able to see her. He thought about everything Hinata had told him about her family and how it worked.

And he had an idea.

I can make the damn thing work for me for once instead of against me.

"Hiashi-sama," Naruto bowed once more. "I ask you to make a bargain with me."

"A bargain?"

"Yes, I ask you to give me until the day of my sixteenth birthday to learn this jutsu. If I can learn it you must agree to admit I am worthy of being with Hinata-chan. I also ask that you allow me to be with her as her boyfriend until that day."

Hiashi shook his head; he was honestly amazed at the young ninja's boldness. He seemed to think nothing of making the most outrageous promises and requests. "That is certainly asking quite a lot. What could you possibly offer that would make me even consider such a bargain?"

Naruto glanced at Hinata. She was looking at him fearfully. *She's worth it.* He decided. *Just being with her makes me happy. Even if we can only have the three years it's worth every risk.* He looked back to Hiashi and spoke with decision. "Hiashi-sama, if I cannot learn the hiraishin by the day of my sixteenth birthday I will allow you to place the caged bird seal upon my head and enter your service as a member of the Hyuga cadet branch."

"Naruto, no!" Hinata jumped to her feet. "You don't know what you're saying!" She turned to her father. "Please ignore him father!"

Jiraiya had also jumped up. "Kid are you nuts?! You'd never even heard about the hiraishin until just now and you're willing to bet your whole future on learning it?"

"I know what I'm doing." Naruto looked at Hinata and reached out to take a hold of her hand. "Hinata-chan, you have no idea how much you mean to me. You make me so very happy; I can't bear the thought of not being with you. I would do anything just to be with you."

"Naruto-kun..." she felt on the verge of tears.

Jiraiya looked at his old teacher who was still seated. "Aren't you going to say something?"

Sarutobi spoke. "I do not agree with Naruto's decision, but it is his choice to make." He looked at Naruto. "Are you sure you are ready to risk so much?"

Naruto nodded. "I am." He looked to Hiashi. "Will you make this bargain with me Hiashi-sama?"

Hiashi said nothing for a moment as he carefully considered what was being offered to him. If he allowed Naruto to date his daughter her reputation and his clan's would be damaged. He was certain she would happy, but that was not the important thing. The two of them being together for three years would not reflect well on either her or the clan.

On the other hand, he would be given the chance to control the jinchuuriki of the Kyuubi. He would even be able to act as a last line of defense should that ever become necessary. The power that lay within Naruto would be at the disposal of his clan.

It was a difficult choice, but what decided him was the fact that he was sure Naruto could never succeed in learning the hiraishin. It was nothing but an outrageous promise made by a boy who did not understand the consequences of what he was saying.

"If I agree to this," Hiashi finally answered. "I expect you to at all times treat my daughter with the respect she deserves. Should I at any time learn you have harmed her or treated her disrespectfully I shall consider our agreement breached and I will *personally* make you regret your actions. Is that clear?"

Naruto gulped. "Hai, Hiashi-sama."

"Also, I expect my daughter to be a virgin when she marries."

Both Hinata and Naruto turned a deep shade of red at that. "I'm only thirteen!" Naruto exclaimed.

"You will not remain thirteen," Hiashi said coolly.

Naruto gave a quick embarrassed nod. "I understand Hiashi-sama."

Hiashi slowly nodded and stood up. "Very well then, under these terms, I accept your bargain Uzumaki Naruto." He held out his hand.

Naruto grasped it and shook it with Sarutobi, Jiraiya, and Hinata there to bear witness.

Their bargain was set.

A really big scroll

Once the dinner was completed Hinata asked if she could have just a few minutes alone with Naruto before he left

Once the dinner was completed Hinata asked if she could have just a few minutes alone with Naruto before he left. Hiashi graciously agreed. And so the two of them had wound up alone in her bedroom. As soon as the door was shut she grabbed on to him and finally let her emotions go. She pressed her face into his chest and wept.

"Why?" She wailed between sobs. "Naruto-kun why did you do it?"

He wrapped his arms around and held her tight. "Because it was the only way for me to be with you Hinata-chan." He gently whispered to her. "Please stop crying now, it's all right."

"But don't you *understand* what will happen if you lose?"

Naruto just nodded. "I'll have the seal put on my head and I'll be a servant to the Hyuga clan for the rest of my life." He shrugged. "It could be worse."

She looked up at him with her tear streaked face. "How? Naruto-kun how could it be worse?"

And in spite of everything he smiled for her. "Easy, I could be without you. That would be a hundred times worse than anything your father could do to me with the seal." He gently wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Please don't cry for me Hinata-chan. I have been all alone for so long, that now that I finally have someone who wants to be with me I can't go back to being alone again." He shook his head sadly. " *Anything* would be better than that."

Looking into his face she couldn't help but feel better. "Oh Naruto-kun, I'm so sorry that you are suffering because of me."

"Don't think that Hinata-chan, don't ever think that. You never make me suffer; all you have done is made me really happy." His smile didn't waver. "Whatever happens we will have these three years together that we wouldn't have otherwise. That is precious enough to be worth any price. Besides, I expect to win this little bet."

"But Naruto-kun no one but the Yondaime was ever able to learn this jutsu. Everyone says it's impossible to master."

"That's o.k. Hinata-chan," he said confidently. "I'm used to doing the impossible. I mean just think about it. I got Iruka-sensei to pass me and even give me the hitai-ite from his own head. Even though I still can't make a regular old bushin. I fought Orochimaru one on one and survived. I got an elitist like Ebisu to call me his best student ever and even apologize to me. I made Chunin just six months out of the academy. And the most amazing thing of all? I actually got Kakashi-sensei to pick me over Sasuke-teme to go into battle with. Compared to all that learning this jutsu will be a snap! I will definitely win."

He was so brave. Despite his front he had to know that the odds were very long against him. But Naruto would never show any doubts, he would always face the world with confidence. Looking at him she felt the courage to do the same.

She nodded her head and gave him a small smile. "I know you will Naruto-kun." She pressed her face to his chest again. "Everything will be all right."

As the three of them left Sarutobi spoke very quietly.

"You know Naruto; the Hokage cannot be under anyone's influence. He must be completely free to make whatever decision is best for the village. He cannot be beholden to anyone else."

Naruto looked up and understood perfectly. "So if I get the caged bird seal that disqualifies me, right?"

Sarutobi nodded sadly. "I'm afraid it would Naruto."

Naruto merely shrugged. "I'm not really surprised, so basically it's really all or nothing huh? I either get my dream and the girl, or I get nothing."

"Kid it's not too late to back out of this." Jiraiya said. "Let's go back right now and talk to Hiashi. If you ask him he'll release you from this agreement."

"That is true Naruto." Sarutobi said.

"If I did that he'd make sure I never got near Hinata-chan again." Naruto answered. "No thanks."

"Damn it kid," a frustrated Jiraiya growled. "What makes you so damn determined to throw away your future?"

Naruto came to a sudden stop and both older men had come up short. Naruto looked up at Jiraiya. "I know I'm not that old or experienced yet, and since I was dead last at the academy I get that I'm not really smart either. But there's one thing my life has taught me that I know for an absolute fact. And that's when you find someone that you really truly love; you do whatever you have to, to be with them."

With that Naruto headed home while the two older ninja watched him go.

"He can be very surprising sometimes." Sarutobi took out his pipe and lit it.

"You know, I'm just starting to figure that out." Jiraiya admitted. "Well, there's at least one bright spot to all this."

"Oh? What might that be?" Sarutobi asked.

Jiraiya pulled out his notebook and pen. "This is going to make one hell of a good story."

When Neji returned from his date he was not really surprised to find Hinata there waiting for him. Seeing her there Neji gave her a deep formal bow that was polite on its surface and mocking underneath.

"Good evening Lady Hinata, have you been waiting up for me?"

"How was your date cousin?" Hinata asked.

"Actually it went quite well. Tenten and I had a very good evening." Neji declined to mention any details. "And how was your evening?" He asked pleasantly. "Did things go well for your boyfriend?"

Neji was certain things had gone badly for the baka ninja. He still wanted to hear exactly how badly they had gone.

Hinata told him. She informed of everything from the arrival of Naruto, Jiraiya, and Sarutobi up to and including Naruto's desperate bargain and her father's acceptance of it.

"So from now until the day Naruto turns sixteen I have my father's blessing to date him." Hinata finished.

Neji just stood there amazed. "Well, I knew he was a baka, I just never knew how much of one. He is actually trading his freedom away just to be your boyfriend for three years?" Neji chuckled. "He really has no sense of what a thing is worth does he?"

Her hands twitched, she came very close to activating his seal. "Don't mock him," she warned.

Neji noted the stiffness in her stance and the tiny lines that pulled down at the edges of her mouth. "My, my, Lady Hinata, it seems that you have finally developed some backbone."

"You have no idea." She said. "I am going to work very hard to become a really strong kunoichi. I want to be able to help Naruto if

he should ever need me. And besides," she let herself smile a bit. "It's only fitting that the wife of the Hokage should be strong."

She actually meant it, she actually believed the nonsense she was spouting. "It seems you are picking up your boyfriend's delusions as well as his nerve. He has as much chance of becoming Hokage as he does of winning this bet."

"And there I agree with you." Hinata enjoyed seeing the rare look of confusion on her cousin's face. "In any case cousin I didn't wait for you to discuss Naruto. I wanted to make sure you got your new assignment for tomorrow."

"They've sent me my first assignment as a Chunin?" He asked eagerly.

"Not exactly." Hinata handed him a sheet of paper.

He took a look at it. "What is this?" He demanded.

"What does it look like?"

"It looks like a training schedule for all the clan children ages five to seven." Neji stated.

Hinata nodded. "That's exactly what it is. I spoke to my father about you earlier." Neji sent her a dark look which she pointedly ignored. "Since you seem to have enough free time to be concerned about my personal life I thought we should find something for you to do with all that spare time. My father agreed that you have been given far too much leeway and need to be reminded of your proper place. From now on, whenever you are in the village you will spend your mornings training the cadet children basic jyuken."

"Is this a joke?" Neji demanded. "Any competent cadet member can do this! This will take away significant training time."

"Your time belongs to the clan and to the village before it belongs to you." Hinata reminded him. "For all your complaints about destiny you seem to have forgotten that. Father feels it's time you were reminded."

"I see," he answered quietly. "You really have started to grow up haven't you Lady Hinata? You've truly begun acting like a main branch Hyuga. This is your little payback isn't it?"

"No Neji," she said sweetly. "This is only the start." With that she walked away and left him.

Neji slowly crumpled the paper before heading to his room and to bed.

The following day Naruto and a couple clones brought all his things to his new home. Since the house was furnished he just brought clothes and personal effects. It felt sort of strange to have so much space all to himself.

Early in the afternoon Jiraiya arrived with a massive scroll, it was about the same size as the forbidden scroll Naruto had stolen out of the tower.

"Here you go kid; I suggest you take very good care of this scroll. There are only two like it in the whole world. The other one is locked up in a secret room in the tower. Be very careful who you tell about this, any of the ninja villages would pay a fortune to get their hands on it."

Naruto took the huge scroll from him. "Whoa! So how many jutsus are in this thing? Ten? Fifteen? Twenty?"

Jiraiya shook his head. "Try one, kid."

"Just one?"

Jiraiya nodded. "This is the scroll containing the Hirasishin no Jutsu."

Naruto looked at the thing. "Uhm, so most of it is probably blank right?"

"Why don't you try opening it and see for yourself?"

Naruto did just that. He noticed that the formulas and instructions were written in depressingly small size. There was a lot of material here. He began unwinding the scroll to see just how much. He kept unwinding. Then had to unwind some more, and some more. He kept right on going, there were no breaks in the hand writing. He wound up unrolling it almost the very end. On his living room floor was a pile of the most complex formulas and instructions he had ever laid eyes on.

"Oh you have got to be kidding me!" Naruto cried out.

"You finally starting to get some idea of how hard this is gonna be? You know kid it's still not to late to get out of this."

Naruto shook his head stubbornly. "I won't go back on my word, and no way will I give up being with Hinata-chan."

"Well then kid, I wish you a lot of luck."

"Hey! Aren't you going to help me ero-sennin?"

"I already told you kid, I could never learn it. If you have a specific question with a specific instruction I'll see what I can do. Otherwise you are on your own."

"Well can't you give me some advice or something?"

"How about prayer and a few offerings to Kami?"

"Gee thanks, a lot of help you turn out to be."

Jiraiya rolled his eyes. "All right kid, I'll give you some general advice. First, don't try and study everything at once. Break everything up into sections and attack each one separately and figure out as much as you can. Hopefully you can eventually get enough pieces to put the whole together."

"You mean like a jig saw puzzle?"

"Sort of, second, I'm sure you already know you can use Kage Bushin as a way to learn more than normal." Naruto nodded.

"Whenever you study make kage bushins, but no more than nine or ten."

"But why? I can make a couple hundred and learn a lot more!"

Jiraiya shook his head. "That's a good idea with taijutsu or working on hand signs you already know. For anything involving *repetition* the more clones the better. However, to learn something new, especially something requiring comprehension and interpretation the more clones you use the more confusing it will become when you reintegrate all of them. The studying does no good if the knowledge comes back to you in a jumbled mess. So no more than ten clones, maximum."

Naruto wasn't happy but he nodded.

"And third, work on it every single night you're in the village. Even if you're tired and sick of the thing work on it, at least an hour. You may have a lot of time to study it, but you're going to need it. This thing is going to frustrate the hell out of you kid. I'll guarantee you that right now. But no matter how much of a struggle it gets to be you have to keep going. Now roll this thing back up and I'll show you a hiding place for it."

"Thanks ero-sennin."

"Kid, don't call me that."

Naruto smiled at him. "It's that or pedophile."

"Why don't you just call me Jiraiya-sensei, like every other student I've ever had."

Naruto seemed to think about it. "Nah, I think ero-sennin suits you better."

Over the following week events took place outside Konoha that would have important effects on the future.

Kabuto was whistling a happy tune as he sat waiting for the information to download. Near him were a few bodies sprawled out on the floor. Outside the research area were the bodies of all the guards and workers who had been here. It was a bit of a shame, they had served Orochimaru faithfully, but the deaths were necessary to hide his identity. The leaf village had enough reason to come after him without knowing he had all Orochimaru's secrets too.

People had talked for a long time about extending modern communications. People talked about one day picking up a phone in Konoha and calling someone in Kumo and actually being able to talk to them. Kabuto thought that would be absolutely amazing, but didn't think it would ever happen. Thousands of miles of easily cut or tapped phone lines running all over the continent? Sure. The powers that be would want *that*. You might as well wish for paved roads leading between all the towns and cities. Technically it was even possible to connect computers to allow the fast transfer of information over vast distances. Now that could be useful. As compared to the many small computer webs found in individual cities, all computers could be made into a single vast web perhaps spanning the whole world. Of course the idea of information passing quickly and easily over borders would give all the Kages and great lords heart attacks.

There were some advantages to how things were now, the main one being security of course. Orochimaru had been obsessed with security and had kept all his information on a single computer system in his Alpha base. There were no back ups anywhere else.

When the download was at last complete Kabuto took out the single precious disc and put it in a plastic case. He then went over to the gasoline bomb and tapped down on the starter. It began to tick, in ten minutes this entire base would begin to burn. He would have all of Orochimaru's information. He left the research area still whistling. He already had Orochimaru's ring, which meant there was just one last thing to take care of.

He had been the first to make it back to the base. He had immediately told everyone that they had won a crushing victory and that Orochimaru was staying in the ruins a few days to savor his triumph. Everyone had believed him without question.

Especially Kimimaro. He'd never doubted that Orochimaru would triumph. He'd wanted desperately to be there to fight for his lord, but the onset of his illness had made it impossible. Kimimaro had been grateful when Kabuto offered to try a new treatment on him. He'd said not a word as Kabuto gave him a sedative.

Kabuto was standing over an unconscious Kimimaro. According to the heart monitor he was doing well.

As Kabuto prepared an injection he talked to the unconscious ninja.

"You know it really is a shame that this has to be your end. You were ready to become Orochimaru-sama's new host, a truly noble sacrifice, only to be cheated by disease." Kabuto shook his head sadly. "Then you weren't even allowed to at least die in battle fighting for Orochimaru. Fate really can be cruel at times."

He found a vein and pushed the plunger down. "If I thought I might be able to cure you I'd ask you to come with me. But as it is, you

only have a few months left. A few months of pain and watching yourself slowly expire, without even the condolence of being of some use to the one we called master. This is much better. A quick painless end, and you die thinking Orochimaru alive and victorious. I know you would thank me for this if you could."

Kabuto stood there and watched the heart beat slow, and finally stop. He reached over and clicked off the monitor.

As he exited the base he heard the gas bomb go off.

Sighing he began to leap through the trees and started his long journey. He was sure master Sasori would be happy with the gifts he was bringing him.

"Well now," Kisame said. "This is the first time we've all been gathered together since Orochimaru betrayed us."

"At least his death provides us some small good fortune." Sasori growled from a blocky body.

"Doesn't make up for the bad news though, yeah." Deidara replied.

"The one tail is dead." Itachi said calmly. "What are we to do?"

All eyes turned towards their leader.

"The possibility that one of the jinchuuriki would be killed prior to extraction was always present. This does not affect the ultimate goal of our organization." Their leader replied with ease.

Kisame grinned. "So what now fearless leader?"

Pein answered. "I have a plan..."

Return to normal

Authors's Notes: Well with a thousand reviews it's official now, this story is my second most popular one ever. I thank all of you who have read and especially those who have taken the time to review. Now just a few things that have been coming up in some of the reviews.

Yes, Tsunade will make an appearance and she will be a part of this story. And trust me the reasons for her return will make sense.

As for Jiraiya and Naruto leaving for two and a half years, remember the main reason for that was to protect Naruto from Akatsuki. The two of them will still do some travelling, but nothing quite so extended.

Also some of you seem to be worried that I am not going to finish this story for some reason. Please relax, I always finish what I start, for that is my author's way. Now I hope all of you will enjoy this chapter.

The Council of Wind sat silently at the table. Their leader was a ninja named Sulamon. Sulamon was a few years older than Sarutobi and the leader of one of Suna's great clans. Had he wanted to he likely could have been the fourth Kazekage. But he had always preferred working behind the scenes. But now, with the fourth murdered, their secret weapon lost, and their army shattered he was being forced to lead.

"The seven days cease fire will be at an end tomorrow. We must make a decision. We must either accept the terms or continue this war." Sulamon informed them.

"We cannot accept the terms!" Hideo shouted angrily. "They are outrageous!"

Most of the other council members nodded their agreement.

Furido decided to read some of them off. "We must pay ten billion ryu in indemnities over the next fifty years. We agree not to wage war without first receiving permission from the leaf village. No sand ninja may accept or perform any mission beyond the borders of Wind country." There was more, but those were the main points.

"These terms would cripple us! We would no longer be considered one of the five great ninja villages!" Hideo stated.

"I rather think that is the point." Sulamon said.

"Could we at least get them to modify the terms? Perhaps we can open negotiations and reach a reasonable settlement." Furido offered.

Sulamon shook his head firmly. "I tried that the moment we received them. I was rebuffed. The reply from Sarutobi was quite clear, there will be no negotiations. We must accept the terms or fight."

Sulamon let out a weary sigh. Things could not have ended much worse. Their army had suffered 50 percent losses while the leaf nins losses had been minimal. He had hoped that the offer of unconditional surrender would have been enough to satisfy the Hokage. If Konoha had suffered heavy casualties it probably would have been. But with the leaf forces still intact and strong Sarutobi was in a position to press hard.

"Does Sarutobi realize that our Kazekage was murdered and that we were actually led into this war by Orochimaru?" Furido asked.

Sulamon nodded. "He has been made aware of that fact. He states that regardless of the Kazekage's murder the fact remains that the decision to attack Konoha with Orochimaru had been made by him. He feels we were not tricked into war but deliberately broke our alliance to attack them. He feels we have proven ourselves untrustworthy, and must be weakened."

Unhappy murmurs spread up and down the table. The sad fact was they *had* broken a treaty. Sarutobi would have been a fool to trust them again, and Sarutobi was no fool.

"Then it's settled," Hideo said. "We must fight."

"Baki," Sulamon looked to him. "As our general you know the condition of our forces better than anyone. What is your opinion? Can we win or even survive a continuation of the war?"

Baki rose to his feet and looked at the other council members. "We still have significant forces and our defenses are formidable. If it comes to a fight I am certain we could withstand a siege for many months, perhaps up to a year."

"A siege?" Hideo asked unhappily. "Couldn't we fight them in the field?"

"No," Baki replied firmly. "We are much too weak to have any chance in open battle. Were we to fight them in that manner I fear it would only lead to a swift defeat."

"After which Suna would be destroyed." Sulamon elaborated. "Just as it would be at the end of a long siege. No, I am afraid we cannot fight them."

"These terms will ruin us as a great power." Hideo stated.

"They will, for at least a generation." Sulamon said. "But perhaps future generations will be able to win back what we have lost. Regardless, it is our duty to save Suna. While to resist would be brave, it would also be foolish. If we fight the ultimate end will be the destruction of the village. Therefore, we have no choice but to surrender."

Furido sighed. "This treaty will make Konoha much more powerful, and reduce the number of great villages to four."

Sulamon nodded, but there was nothing he could do.

By a vote of eight to one Suna accepted the surrender terms.

To the north the end played out differently.

In the castle of the Rice Daimyo the doors to the throne room were opened. From the doorway to the raised dais all the lords of Rice country were lined up. As Danzo entered at the head of a contingent of twenty leaf nins the lords bowed low to him. Danzo knew Sarutobi didn't fully trust him. The Hokage had allowed him this honor as a way to show favor and keep him tied close. What Danzo thought of that he would keep to himself, but even if he did not smile he was enjoying this. He would have liked to have strutted into the room and towards the throne. With his shattered body he couldn't manage to strut. Instead he walked slowly and with all the dignity of a conqueror.

When Danzo at least reached the foot of the dais the Rice Daimyo stood and came down the steps. The man certainly looked the part; he had on bulky and flowing robes of purple and gold. He carefully moved the robes out of the way as he went down on both knees. He slowly removed his ceremonial sword and offered it up.

"As Daimyo and ruler of Rice country, I submit."

With his single arm Danzo reached out and took the sword from him. "As the representative of the Lord Hokage and of the Daimyo of Fire country, I hereby accept your submission."

All of this was merely ceremony. The surrender had already been negotiated. Sarutobi considered the man to be nothing but Orochimaru's unwilling victim. As such he was being shown great mercy. Rice country was being annexed to fire and the man would no longer be the Daimyo of an independent nation. However he

would continue to rule from his castle, the only difference being he would do so as a governor under the authority of the fire lord.

The surrender marked the official end of the war against Sound. Most of the sound nin had died in the streets of Konoha. The few remaining survivors had fled. Everything that Orochimaru had spent his lifetime building was being dismantled and destroyed.

"So where have you been the last week?" Naruto asked. He and Jiraiya were in the backyard of his new home.

"Believe it or not kid I have responsibilities that involve things other than you."

Naruto frowned. "Like what? Peeping at the women's bathhouse?"

"No, of course not," Jiraiya answered. "I do that strictly on my own time."

"Whatever," Naruto muttered. "So ero-sennin, I'm still waiting for my first mission as a Chunin. I kept asking the old man, but all he would say was that I had to wait to talk to you."

Jiraiya nodded. "That's because for the next few months you won't be going on any missions."

"Say what?! What do you mean no missions?" Naruto demanded.

Jiraiya sighed, why was he not surprised Naruto was making this difficult? "Look kid, we've got just under three years to build up your reputation and turn you into the strongest ninja in the village. That means you're not going to be going on any regular missions. The missions you go on will be especially difficult. They'll be chosen not just to enhance your reputation but to test your limits and force you to develop the skills you'll need."

"Super difficult missions? That sounds great!"

"Yeah, but since these missions **are** going to be extra rough you need to be ready."

"But I am ready," Naruto insisted. "I mean I totally kicked ass during the invasion. Why do you think the old man promoted me?"

"You did very well," Jiraiya admitted. "And your promotion was well deserved. But despite being a Chunin now the fact remains you have some very basic weaknesses that we need to address before you start going on missions."

"Like what?"

"Well, your most glaring weakness is your taijutsu. Ebisu was able to make it passable, but that isn't near good enough."

"You're going to teach me taijutsu?"

"Not just any taijutsu." Jiraiya said proudly. "Kid you're going to learn hermit style, one of the rarest and most demanding styles known to man or frog."

Naruto gave him an odd look and mouthed the words, 'man or frog?'

"Also, technically, I won't be the one teaching you."

"Oh great, so you're dumping me just like Kakashi-sensei did."

"No kid, I'm going to let a specialist train you in the mornings while I take care of other responsibilities. Then I'll come back in the afternoon to work on teaching you other skills and jutsus."

Naruto looked at the man suspiciously. "Are you *really* going to teach me jutsus?"

"I sure am kid, but now let me bring in your teacher. Now before I do that I'm going to give you a fair warning." For a change Jiraiya looked extremely serious. "Fukasaku-sensei can be very strict. Don't

give him attitude and don't make up any of your pet names for him, or you'll get the ruler."

"The ruler?"

"You'll find out kid, trust me. He may seem different but he taught me the hermit style and I guarantee you he'll teach you a lot too. So you ready to meet him?"

"Sure." Naruto expected Jiraiya to leave and return with his new teacher. Instead the old hermit bit down on his thumb and ran through some hand signs. He slammed his hand down on the ground and there was a puff of smoke.

When the smoke cleared there was a frog sitting there. He was easily the weirdest looking frog Naruto had ever seen. He had on a black kimono and had a grey beard and mustache. The frog looked up at him and then turned to Jiraiya. "So is this Naruto?"

"Yeah." Jiraiya said.

Naruto was a bit surprised to be hearing a frog talk. He had seen a talking turtle before though, and Kakashi had mentioned that his nin dogs could talk.

"He looks pretty stupid." The frog said.

"Hey!" Naruto shouted. "Who are you calling stupid you dumb frog?"

Jiraiya closed his eyes and began massaging his temples. "Kid you shouldn't have said that."

The frog eyed Naruto up and down. "Jiraiya-chan, why don't you leave me with the smart mouth here?"

"All right, but try not to hurt him too bad."

"No promises."

Jiraiya sighed. "Kid, remember what I said, be polite." He shunshinned away.

Naruto looked down unhappily at the frog. "No way am I learning anything from a frog."

"Well not with that attitude you're not." The frog took a wooden ruler from his back and held it like a samurai sword. "Now for your very first lesson." The frog leapt up to Naruto's face and smacked his cheek with a loud, 'thwack.'

"Ow!" Naruto slapped a hand over a reddening cheek. "That hurt!"

"As I was saying," the frog continued. "Your first lesson, I am Fukasaku-sensei. You will never refer to me as anything else, especially not, 'dumb frog.' Now Jiraiya-chan asked me to come teach you the hermit style. Now we can do this the hard way or... well, there's really only the hard way."

Naruto was glaring at the frog. "Forget it! No way am I learning anything from you. What would a frog know about fighting anyway?"

"Oh? You don't think a frog can fight?"

"That's right," Naruto said.

"Very well, let's have a spar. If you can hit me just once I'll leave you alone."

"Fine," Naruto swung down trying to hit him.

Only to have the frog land on his wrist, run up his arm and slap him across both cheeks with his ruler, thwack, thwack.

"Oh that's it!" Naruto shouted and went all out to show the frog just who was in charge.

Jiraiya returned in the early afternoon to find a panting and exhausted Naruto lying flat on his back with Fukasaku sitting on his chest.

"I take it the day went well?" Jiraiya asked.

"He reminds me of you." Fukasaku said. He looked down at the panting ninja and held his ruler threateningly. "So what is my name?"

A weary Naruto looked up at him. "Fukasaku-sensei."

"Good," the frog nodded. "Tomorrow we start with hermit style." With a puff of smoke he disappeared.

Jiraiya came over and helped a sore Naruto back up to his feet. "I told you to be polite."

Naruto nodded. "Man I never knew frogs could be so tough."

"They can be very surprising," Jiraiya agreed. He also began to smile. "So you have a new found respect for frogs huh?"

"I sure do."

"Well that's good, how would you like to be able to summon them?"

"Yosh, thank you both for doing this."

Tenten smiled at her former sensei. "We are both happy to."

"Are you sure this is wise sensei?" Neji asked as he pushed the wheelchair. "I thought your stay in the hospital would be extended."

Guy nodded wearily. "The doctors speak of four or five months, but I will be there only one. If I am still in the hospital in more than one month's time I will run 500 laps around the village backwards!"

Neji and Tenten shared an amused look. It seemed that despite all he had been through he would be all right. "Are you sure about doing this right now?" Tenten asked. "I am sure they would understand if you waited until you were stronger."

Guy vehemently shook his head. "Though I lack the strength to walk there I am strong enough to do what must be done, and I have delayed too long already."

His two former students did not try and talk him out of it. Truthfully they were both happy to help him. They owed a duty as well. As they went through the streets people stopped to bow to them or applaud them. Their faces were all well known within the village, especially Guy's. Normally Guy would be gushing at all the praise he was receiving. But he seemed a little subdued, almost embarrassed by it.

At long last the three of them arrived at a small inn in the northern end of the village. Though he grunted from the exertion Guy stood up and knocked on the door. When the door opened two surprised people greeted him. There was a very small dark haired woman and a man with some incredibly thick eyebrows.

Though it hurt Guy gave them a deep and respectful bow. Standing behind him Tenten and Neji did the same.

"I have come to apologize to you and to ask your forgiveness." Guy told Lee's parents. "I was Lee's sensei and I failed him."

The parents were silent for a moment, and then the father spoke in a quiet. "Maito Guy, we know you did the best you could for our son, and you avenged him. You have both our forgiveness and our thanks."

Guy lifted his head and nodded gratefully. "Your son was my precious protégé, I will always miss him."

Together the five people present remembered and honored the fiery and youthful Rock Lee.

He would forever enjoy the springtime of youth.

Having signed the summoning contract Naruto bit down on his thumb and ran through the hand signs like Jiraiya had shown him. He poured in as much chakra as he could, wanting to summon a really big frog. " **Kuchiyose no Jutsu** " Instantly there was a huge puff of smoke.

Naruto looked eagerly as it cleared to see just how big a frog he had summoned.

"Hi there, you got any chips?"

Naruto looked down to see a red and black frog about the size of a small dog. "Aw man! I wanted to summon a big one!"

Jiraiya didn't say it, but he was impressed. Summoning Gamakichi, the boss toad's own offspring, was pretty damn good for your very first try. "I can already see you're going to need to work really hard at this kid."

Gamakichi looked over to Jiraiya and then back to Naruto. "So are there any chips around here or what?"

Another week passed.

As it became clear the war was over repairs began to speed up and life began to return to normal. In his office the Hokage and Jiraiya were having a private meeting.

"How is Naruto's training going?"

"Not bad," Jiraiya admitted. "He is starting to pick up the hermit style and he has summoning down. I've started to show him the rasengan and he's doing pretty well with that. A few months and he might just be worth something."

Sarutobi nodded.

"Have all the strike teams returned?"

"They have," Sarutobi said. "All of Orochimaru's facilities have been destroyed and all his prisoners have been freed. Although we did not manage to capture many of his people, most of them fled upon hearing of Orochimaru's death."

"Can't say I blame them, considering the *research* they were involved in." Jiraiya paused for a bit. "There's something I've been wanting to talk to you about, it involves Akatsuki."

Sarutobi gave the man his full attention, anything that involved Uchiha Itachi always drew his full attention. "Yes?"

"It's rather interesting; they had just started becoming more active recently. And now they've gone completely off the map. My spy networks have been tracking them; they've been a high priority. Now all at once they seem to have disappeared."

"That is unusual; do you have any idea why they've suddenly become inactive?"

"Well, given the timing I have to think it has something to do with either the war or with Orochimaru's death. Given that he was once a member I suspect the latter to be the most likely cause, but what the real connection is? I couldn't even begin to guess."

Sarutobi lit his pipe and took a couple puffs as he considered. "Well, whatever the reason if they have decided to become inactive I think we can call that good news."

"Probably," Jiraiya was slow to agree. "But I've got this nasty little feeling that we'll have to pay for this good fortune later on."

In his hidden base in Rain country he looked at his plans and nodded. The new plan was just starting to go into effect. It would likely take a couple years before he would begin to see the results. That was all right, he knew how to be patient. In the meantime he would work on increasing his organization's wealth and on destroying Hanzo and his power structure. Before long he would be the ruler of this country, and some day after that he would be the ruler of the world. Pein again nodded.

Operation Legacy was under way.

A mission

Three Months had passed.

Hinata was humming happily in the kitchen. The beef stir fry was just about done and so was the rice. Now she just had to finish with the vegetables

Naruto poked his head into the kitchen. "That smells really good! Is it ready yet Hinata-chan?"

"Almost Naruto-kun," she told him.

"But I'm soooooo hungry," he whined. "I'm staaaaarving!" he put his hands on his stomach and began to sway back and forth as though on the verge of collapse.

Hinata put a hand over her mouth as she began giggling. She loved his antics, and how he didn't care if he looked silly at times. "Dinner will be ready in just a few more minutes Naruto-kun, can you hold out that long?"

He groaned but nodded. "Hey Hinata-chan when are you going to make me some more of that delicious ramen?"

"I'll make you some more next week Naruto-kun; I made you some just yesterday."

"Why can't we have it more than just once a week?"

"Because it's not healthy for you," she told him. "You need more protein and vitamins. Now the stir fry is almost done why don't sit down at the table and I'll bring dinner out?"

As they sat down to a nice dinner Naruto was soon regaling her with his latest taijutsu move and about the, 'super cool' jutsu Jiraiya was

showing him. As they ate and talked Hinata reflected on how much she'd been enjoying the past few months.

Ever since that dinner with her father her life had almost become a dream. She had always wanted to be acknowledged by Naruto and to be able to date him. She had that now. Not only was she dating him but she even had her father's blessing to do so openly. She was determined to spend as much time with him as possible. Father had taken a new interest in her since the Chunin exams and he was now training her. Whenever she was in the village she would train in the mornings and afternoons and then she would come be with Naruto.

It was heaven.

They would usually go out on Saturday nights the rest of the time she would come over and cook for him. Then they would just sit and talk or listen to music or she would tell him stories. She would stay with him until she was required to go home. To be truthful she would have liked to have taken her things and moved into one of his spare bedrooms. But she was sure her father wasn't quite *that* understanding. To say nothing of the fact she didn't think she would have the nerve to actually ask Naruto something like that.

All the time she had been watching him she had imagined what it would be like to be his girlfriend. The reality was even better than what she'd imagined. Since the death of her mother she had grown up in a cold and sterile environment. Everything was proper; everything was formal, even when there was no one else to see. Being with Naruto was like seeing the difference between night and day. He was warm, kind, and was always making her laugh. He cared about what she thought and actually listened to her when she spoke. Whenever she was with him she was always smiling and happy.

Except when one thought occurred to her.

"Have you been making any progress with the Hiraishin no Jutsu?"
She asked.

Naruto stopped eating and his light mood seemed to evaporate some. "Not really Hinata-chan. I work on it every single night, but it doesn't make sense to me. It's so totally complicated I just can't seem to make any headway." Seeing the worried look on her he suddenly gave her a big smile. "But I'm sure I'll figure it out."

"Isn't Jiraiya helping you with this?"

Naruto shook his head. "Not really, I've asked him a few questions about some of the formulas. But he's told me that I'm going to have to figure it out on my own."

She didn't like that at all. "I thought you were his apprentice. Why isn't he helping you more?"

"He helps me a lot more than Kakashi ever did. I see him every afternoon and he works with me teaching jutsu and chakra control and gives me lessons on being a master spy."

"A master spy?" Hinata sounded a bit surprised. "Aren't you more of a combat type?" She adored Naruto, but even she was willing to admit that with his loud nature and in your face attitude he did not seem cut out for surveillance.

"Actually Hinata-chan I know a little something about hiding and being invisible when I need to." Memories of hiding from angry crowds or sneaking about to set up a prank came to mind. "I'm actually learning a lot from ero-sennin, just not about the hiraishin. He says I'm going to have to figure it out on my own, I kind of think he didn't do too well when he tried to learn it."

"Can I help?"

"Thanks Hinata-chan, but..."

"I'm good with formulas," she blurted out. "Maybe I could help with that, at least a little bit."

"That's really nice of you Hinata-chan. But you already cook all these great meals for me and I couldn't ask you to study too." He made a face. "That would be asking way too much."

"Naruto-kun," she looked at him seriously. "You never asked me to cook for you. I offered to. Being able to give you a good nutritious meal makes me very happy. I want you to learn this jutsu Naruto. If I could help you with that then that would make me very happy too."

He thought about it. "Are you sure Hinata-chan?"

She nodded. "I'm very sure Naruto-kun. You're only in this situation because of me. I want to do everything I can to make sure you don't end up with a seal." As he watched her face darkened just a tad. "I... I want for us to be together one day. And I would be very happy to help in any way I can."

And slowly he nodded. "All right, I'd like the help."

The following day found Sakura heading towards the bridge which was team Kakashi's usual meeting spot. Her feet dragged. She didn't want to spend another couple of hours with one teammate silently brooding and the other cursing up a storm as they waited for their sensei. As she was walking down a street she spotted a blonde running past. He was in some baggy shorts and a dark T shirt. Oh, and there was a toad with a beard and a kimono sitting on top of his head.

"Naruto!" she shouted.

Naruto pulled up and looked around. Seeing her he smiled and jogged over to her. Just seeing that big goofy smile made her happy, it had been way too long.

"Sakura-chan! Hey, it's good to see you!"

"It's good to see you too Naruto. Where have you been? I've hardly seen you since you made Chunin."

"Oh I've just been training like crazy. How about you?"

Sakura let out a sigh. "I've been on a bunch of missions, nothing too exciting. I have a new teammate now."

Naruto was about to ask something when the toad spoke up. "That's enough chit chat. Are you a ninja or a gossiping old woman? Get back to running."

"Hai Fukasaku-sensei. Sorry Sakura-chan, I've got to go." He turned and started running again in the original direction. "I'll see you later!" He shouted back to her.

"I'll see you." Sakura stood there and watched as he quickly disappeared from sight. Watching him go she thought about all the times he had chased after her. All the times he'd asked her for dates or tried to talk to her. And now he couldn't even find just a few minutes to talk to her. How things had changed!

When she got to the bridge she was reminded again that things were different now. On one rail was Sasuke on the other was her new teammate. They were both pointedly looking at the water and not at each other. She screwed on a fake smile and approached them. Once again she would try and keep the team at least functioning.

"Good morning Sasuke."

"Hn," was his only reply. He didn't even bother to look at her.

Sighing she approached her other teammate. "Good morning Tayuya."

Tayuya at least looked at her and acknowledged her existence. "Good morning Sakura." She raised her voice just a little. "And how is the prince of pity today."

Sasuke stiffened a little at the dig but refused to say anything. He had often argued with Naruto, but preferred to treat Tayuya as though she didn't exist.

"Please don't," Sakura said quietly. She was desperate to maintain whatever fragile peace was still left.

"Whatever," Tayuya shrugged and looked back down at the water.

Sakura decided to wait on Tayuya's side this morning. She already knew Sasuke would not appreciate her trying to get close to him.

When Tayuya had been assigned to their squad Sakura had been a bit worried about having an older kunoichi competing with her for his attention. Well *that* at least had not been a problem.

Flashback

Sasuke had gone directly up to his new teammate after having her introduced by Kakashi. "I hope you plan on spending your time training and not wasting it trying to ask me out on dates."

Sakura had flinched to hear the contempt in his voice.

Tayuya had frowned at him. "What the fuck makes you think I'd want to go out with an arrogant bastard like you?"

Sasuke, Sakura, and even Kakashi had gaped open mouthed at her. Sakura had once heard Hinata insult Sasuke while defending Naruto. But she had never seen, frankly she had never imagined, a girl openly dinking Sasuke.

"Don't insult Sasuke-kun!" She'd yelled almost out of reflex.

Tayuya had looked at her. "Why? Will it hurt his fucking feelings? Is he a ninja or a precious little princess?"

Sasuke had given her a cold look. "I am Uchiha Sasuke, heir and last son of the mighty Uchiha clan."

Tayuya had smiled. "So?"

That was how it had started. From there it had gotten worse. Tayuya simply refused to treat Sasuke as anything special. She didn't acknowledge him as the team's leader. She didn't recognize him as a genius or even as a particularly strong ninja. In fact she went out of her way to point out to him that she had far more experience than he did and was a stronger ninja. She made no effort to get to know him or to get him to like her. Naruto had tried to be Sasuke's rival. Tayuya didn't want to be Sasuke's anything. Sasuke response to all this was to ignore her as much as possible. Which led to some very awkward and quiet times.

Sakura had originally thought it was all a misunderstanding. She assumed that once Tayuya got to actually know Sasuke she would realize how great he was. She had decided to have a talk with her alone.

"You should be nicer to Sasuke-kun." Sakura had told her new teammate.

"Why?" Tayuya had asked.

"Because he is a great and amazing ninja."

Tayuya had looked at her unimpressed. "If he's so great why is he still a Genin? I've heard that this Naruto I'm replacing was promoted to Chunin. If mister fucking wonderful is so great why wasn't he?"

"Sasuke-kun just hasn't had the chance to prove himself yet."

"If he hasn't proven anything yet how can you say he's amazing? What has he actually done?"

Sakura thought about it. "He survived facing a really powerful ninja named Haku."

"I've never heard of this Haku, and just surviving a fight doesn't impress me. You're supposed to survive. If you were there that means you survived too."

Sakura opened her mouth, but didn't say that she had spent the whole mission without ever throwing a single blow. "He fought Orochimaru and almost defeated him."

Tayuya burst out laughing. "Is that what he fucking believes?!" She howled and clutched her ribs.

"What is so funny?" Sakura demanded.

"Orochimaru-sama was one of the most powerful ninja alive! Do you honestly think a little piss ant Genin could survive ten seconds against him in a real fight? I fought Orochimaru, so did all my old teammates. That was his way of testing us to see if we were worthy of his interest. Let me just guess, at some point Sasuke was completely paralyzed, right?"

Sakura could remember that moment, she and Sasuke had both thought they'd died. Their bodies had been completely rigid.

Seeing Sakura nod Tayuya continued. "And once he decided he was interested he gave Sasuke a little gift didn't he? A curse mark to give him extra power and bind him to Orochimaru."

"How do you know about the curse seal?"

"I used to have one too, so did all my teammates. He's actually damn lucky, ninety percent of the ones who get the seal die. *That's* why Sasuke survived and why Orochimaru didn't kill him, he wanted him alive to use later on."

The idea that anyone could just toy with Sasuke didn't sit well with her. "The very next day he single handedly defeated a trio of sound ninja." **Single handed?** Inner Sakura asked. **Didn't Lee and Ino pig's team help?** Quiet, Sakura thought. *I'm trying to make a point.*

"So he beat Dosu, Kin, and Zaku huh? Well that's not too bad, but I'll bet he used the power of his curse seal. I could have beaten those three easily with my curse seal too."

That was true, Sakura thought. Sasuke had gained incredible and frightening strength and overwhelmed his opponents. If he'd fought them without the seal could have defeated them?

"So what else has he done?" Tayuya asked.

Sakura couldn't think of anything else that might impress the girl. "He's the last member of the Uchiha clan."

"That would be true whether he was a weakling or not. Why am I supposed to respect him because he's the last of his clan?"

"He's had a very hard life," Sakura defended. "He saw his older brother kill his clan and has been alone ever since."

Tayuya gave her a glare that made her step back. "My mother was a whore who never once said she loved me and abandoned me when I was five. I grew up in an orphanage where all the kids told me I was a whore's daughter until I was nine. Then I was *sold* to one of Orochimaru's recruiters and was sent to live in the sound village. I won't tell you what that was like, except to say I'm damn lucky Orochimaru wanted to use me as a ninja and not as a test subject." Tayuya shook her head in disgust. "Your little princess may have had a hard time growing up, that doesn't mean he's the only one. It also doesn't mean he gets to have the whole world kiss his ass. He had it rough, too bad. But he needs to deal with it and move on."

Sakura was stunned. She had never thought anyone could learn about Sasuke's tragic past and not be moved by it.

Tayuya turned to go. "I'm not like you; I don't take shit from people. And I sure as hell won't thank them for it."

"What do you mean?"

Tayuya turned to look back at her. "What do you think I mean? He shits all over you and you just smile and ask for more."

"Sasuke-kun does not do that!"

"Of course he does," Tayuya laughed again. "He has no respect for you at all. But then why should he, when you have no respect for yourself?" With that Tayuya left.

Sakura had just stood there.

In the time since she had finally stopped asking Sasuke for dates. When Tayuya had loudly and profanely demanded Kakashi train all his students Sakura had backed her up. She'd begun training much harder and slowly begun a wary friendship with Tayuya. That didn't mean she gave up all hope of winning over Sasuke. Her old dream was one that was very hard to let go of, but bit by bit she was starting to. Even if they would never be together she still hoped to at least be a friend to him. But she was starting to wonder if even that was possible.

With Naruto's departure there was no one who could make Sasuke actually engage in a conversation. He had only become more and more withdrawn. When he did talk it was usually to make a demand that Kakashi teach him a particular jutsu or to register some complaint. More and more all he seemed to care about was getting stronger, his friends, his village, his team, all those things came second to his acquiring more strength.

Sakura leaned back against the rail and shut her eyes. Seeing Naruto this morning had reminded her how things had used to be. It had been rough at times, and never easy, but in the end it had been

fun. All the fun in her life seemed to have left along with her blonde teammate.

That day the lord Hokage had a private meeting with none other than the Fire Lord himself. When the meeting ended he sent for Jiraiya.

"I hear you had a meeting with the Daimyo." Jiraiya said as he entered the office and took a seat.

The Hokage nodded as he lit his pipe. "Your sources are as good as ever."

"So what's this about?" Jiraiya asked. "It must be pretty important if you've called me here."

"The Fire Lord has received a number of angry petitions from various lords, merchants, and bankers. It seems that one of our ninja has been acquiring a great number of debts and refusing to pay them. The Fire Lord finally decided that as an honorable man he needed to rectify the situation. As such he has agreed to pay off all debts that this certain ninja owed, which means the ninja is now in debt to him for the sum of seven million ryu."

"Seven million?! How could someone run up that much debt and get away with it?"

"I suspect no one had the courage, or the stupidity, to try and compel her to pay."

"Her?" Jiraiya paled. "Oh no! You don't mean..."

Sarutobi merely nodded. "I am afraid that in the time Tsunade has been away her love of gambling has not changed."

"Neither has her rotten luck apparently."

The Hokage let out a long puff of smoke. "The Fire Lord insists she return to the village to meet with him and make arrangements to dispose of her debt."

"He's going to ask for the necklace as payment."

Sarutobi nodded. "If she cannot pay off her debt then he indeed will, and he will be well within his rights to do so."

Jiraiya chuckled. "It'll be his funeral."

"No," Sarutobi said flatly. "Tsunade is in the wrong here. She has taken vast sums of money that must be repaid regardless of whether she wants to or not. I believe something can be worked out, but she must come here and meet with the Fire Lord in person. He has charged us with this and we cannot refuse the request."

"And you expect me to find her don't you? It won't be easy; she's very good at keeping a low profile when she wants to."

"If anyone can find her it would be you Jiraiya."

Jiraiya thought about it. "This may take awhile, is it o.k. if I bring someone along?"

When Jiraiya arrived that afternoon he had a big smile on his face. Naruto immediately knew something was up.

"Pack your bags kid," Jiraiya said. "We've got a mission."

Road trip

Author's Note: I got a review from riverdaleswhiteflash that I just have to share with everyone. It suggests how the proposed meeting with the Fire Lord might go.

Daimyo: Give me your necklace.

Loud explosion tears apart several miles of countryside.

Tsunade: cheerfully Give you what?

...

Daimyo: How about you do seven million ryu of medical work?

The two of them were sitting atop the Hokage monument watching the sun set. It was a little cold so he had his arms wrapped around her.

"How long will you be away?" She asked quietly.

"Ero-sennin says it might be anywhere from two weeks to two months," Naruto told her.

"Two months?' she sounded desolate. "But that means you'll miss my birthday, and the New Year."

He nodded. "I know Hinata-chan, and I'm really sorry. But it's a mission, I can't not go."

She sighed. "I know Naruto-kun, we have our duty. I just wish you didn't have to be away for so long."

"Well maybe we'll get lucky and I'll be back soon."

"What is your mission? Or are you not allowed to tell me."

"Oh I can tell you about it Hinata-chan," he said breezily. "It's not like it's anything special. We're just going to bring back some lady by the name of Tsunade."

"Tsunade?" Hinata gasped. " *The* Tsunade?"

Naruto looked a bit confused. "I guess, ero-sennin just said something about him knowing her and that she had to come back with us so she could pay some bill."

"Naruto-kun don't you know who she is? She is one of the Sannin, one of the legendary three; she was a teammate with Jiraiya and Orochimaru."

"Teammates? I guess that means this Tsunade is the same age as ero-sennin. She must be really ancient."

"Naruto-kun, that's not nice."

"I'm just saying she's going to be really old."

"Please don't mention her age when you meet her Naruto-kun, that's considered very rude. And please try to be respectful, not only is she one of the Sannin, she'd the world's top medic nin. I would love the chance to just meet her and ask her about medical jutsu."

Naruto recalled the balm she had given him at the preliminaries. "You like healing people don't you Hinata-chan?"

She nodded a bit. "I don't talk about it much, we Hyuga are supposed to be fearsome warriors. But the truth is, I much prefer healing to fighting. It would be a great honor just to meet the famous Tsunade."

Hearing that Naruto slowly smiled. "Hinata-chan, I may end up missing your birthday, but I'm going to bring you the best present ever."

Relaxing she leaned back into his embrace. "You don't need to get me anything Naruto-kun. The only thing I want is for you to come back safe and sound."

"I definitely will Hinata-chan." he assured her. *And I'm getting you a really awesome gift too.*

For six weeks Jiraiya and Naruto tramped across Fire country trying to track down Tsunade. They followed rumors and reports of all sorts and ended up in casinos and gambling dens of all sizes and shapes. Usually they were just a few days behind. They would arrive to hear how she had blown through another wad of cash and then just vanished.

Though it was frustrating these six weeks were not being wasted. As they traveled Jiraiya would summon Fukasaku each morning to continue his taijutsu and physical training. In the afternoons Jiraiya would take over. Naruto had wanted to bring the hiraishin scroll with him to keep working on it. Jiraiya had immediately shot down that idea. The scroll was far too valuable to risk taking outside the village. So while he did not study the hiraishin he did have some other interesting learning experiences.

The very first city they stopped in was having a festival. Naruto looked about at all the games and stands and funny costumes.

"Say kid," Jiraiya spoke in a friendly tone. "Why don't we split up for a short time? I'll do some checking at the local gambling dens and you can enjoy yourself at the festival."

"O.k.," Naruto agreed.

"You got any money on you?"

"I sure do!" He pulled out a fat gamachan and held it out.

"Oh ho!" Jiraiya grinned. "You're a little millionaire aren't you? Listen kid there are three prohibitions to being shinobi. Three vices that can destroy a ninja, these being women, drink, and cold hard cash."

"Well they don't really affect me. I'm too young to drink, Hinata is the only girl I'm interested in, and since I've spent my whole life saving up this money I'm not really eager to spend it."

"Don't mock the importance of being frugal. The power of money is a fearsome thing and has ruined many a ninja. Even Tsunade is on the verge of self destruction because of her inability to control herself. So let me help you out by taking charge of your money." But as he reached out to take Naruto's purse the young ninja made it disappear.

"No way! The old man warned me not to give you any money. He said if I did you'd make it disappear. He also told me that you're a millionaire thanks to your porn."

Jiraiya looked offended. "It's adult themed literature kid! My novels are works of art."

Naruto rolled his eyes. "Yeah right! They're just dirty books. Any way the old man said that since you're my sensei *you* should pay for everything during this trip." Naruto held out his hand. "So why don't *you* give me some money to spend while I'm at the festival?"

Jiraiya shook his head. It was true that he was rich, but he had not always been so. He'd come from poverty and a lifetime of habit made giving his money to someone (unless that someone was a beautiful woman) go completely against the grain. "Kid if I did that it would be irresponsible of me. What sort of sensei would I be if I encouraged you to develop the destructive habit of wasting money?"

Naruto shrugged. "Fine then, I'll just let the Hokage know you tried to take my purse and then sent me off alone without giving me any funds."

Jiraiya frowned down at him. "That's blackmail kid."

"The old man said it was reminding you of your responsibilities as a sensei."

Well thanks a lot old man. "I can see you're already learning how to be a Hokage." Though it pained him to do so Jiraiya took out his own purse. He pulled out three hundred ryu notes and handed them over.

"Just three hundred ryu?" Naruto complained.

"That's plenty," an annoyed Jiraiya said. "Now remember kid, a responsible ninja does not fall prey to the vices of drink, women, and wild spending. If I learn you've done any of that I'll be very disappointed."

"You can count on me ero-sennin."

Late that evening Naruto had gone looking for him as the festival wound down. He found his sensei passed out and smelling of liquor while two scantily clad women were standing over him counting money as he snored.

Naruto complained as he dragged an unconscious Jiraiya to their hotel. "Well, at least I know what not to do."

"Show me." Jiraiya instructed.

"No problem!" Naruto formed some hand signs. " **Kage Bushin no Jutsu.**" A single clone appeared. He held out his right palm and began gathering chakra. " **Rasengan.**" *Now concentrate on containing it!* With his clones help he formed a swirl of intense chakra into the form of a ball riding in his hand.

Watching, Jiraiya couldn't quite keep a small smirk from his lips. *The kid's actually got it down after just three months! You really are*

something Naruto! He pointed to a tree. "That one."

"Right!" The clone disappeared in a puff of smoke. He raced toward the tree and slammed the rasengan into it. The jutsu bored clean through and left a perfect hole behind. Naruto immediately turned around to look at his teacher. "How was that?" He asked excitedly.

Jiraiya allowed himself to smile. "It's official kid, you've just mastered one of the Yondaime's original jutsus."

"Yatah!" Naruto began doing his now patented victory dance. "I am so awesome!"

Bonk!

Naruto suddenly found himself on the ground with a lump forming on the top of his head.

"Ow!" He glared up at his teacher. "What was that for?"

"Don't get cocky kid. You did a good job, but you're still no Yondaime. It's not like you invented that jutsu, and compared to the hiraishin this is child's play."

Naruto got up. "Oh yeah? Well I'll figure out the hiraishin and some day I'll create my very own jutsus! I'll be an even greater ninja than the Yondaime was!"

Maybe you will kid, I wouldn't bet against you. "You better than the Yondaime?" He snorted. "I'll believe that when I see it." Naruto got a sulky look. "Now come on kid, I'll buy you some ramen to celebrate your achievement."

They were in the northern part of Fire country when the first big snowfall hit. Despite the cold Naruto enjoyed walking along the road looking at all the virgin snow surrounding them. In a normal winter in might only snow a few inches back in the village. Now there was a

foot or more surrounding them. He was so amazed and so entranced that he was caught completely by surprise when a snowball hit him right in the ear and sent him sprawling

Jiraiya was doubled over laughing. "Gotcha kid!"

"Hey what was that?!" Naruto demanded angrily.

Jiraiya began making another snowball. "What? You've never been in a snowball fight before?"

Naruto gave Jiraiya a smile he hadn't ever seen from the blonde. Iruka would have recognized it instantly and taken cover. "You want a snowball fight? You got one ero-sennin!" He ran through some hand signs. " **Kage Bushin no Jutsu.**"

There was a huge puff of smoke. When it cleared Jiraiya found himself surrounded by two hundred Narutos, all of them busily making snowballs. It suddenly occurred to him that this might have been a bad idea. "Now wait a minute!"

"Get him!" Two hundred voices shouted just before Jiraiya found himself plowed under a small flurry of compressed snow.

After six long weeks of running all over fire country they had come to a small resort by some natural hot springs. The two of them were enjoying the steamy water.

"Are you sure you're not a pedophile?"

"Quiet kid!" Jiraiya barked.

Naruto leaned back in his end of the spring. He had never been allowed in the bath house back in Konoha. He had to admit, the hot water felt good. Especially given all his sore muscles from constant travel and training. "How much longer are we going to be out here?"

Jiraiya grinned. "Relax kid; we're going to find her in exactly two days time."

"How can you say that? Everywhere we've gone we've missed her!"

"Ah, but now we aren't following leads. I know exactly where she'll be in two days." Jiraiya sounded smug. "She'll be in the city of Telmut."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Simple, the mega casino there is hosting its annual poker tournament. It has a five hundred thousand ryu grand prize and is open to anyone who can pay the entrance fee. Poker is Tsunade's favorite game, and there's no chance she'll miss this tournament. She'll definitely be there, but we have to find her quick. She'll lose immediately and might decide to leave."

"Well maybe she'll get on a winning streak and we'll have more time to find her."

Jiraiya laughed. "Not her! She's addicted to gambling but has the worst luck at it. She's so bad she's actually earned the nickname, 'the legendary sucker.'"

"If she's so bad why does she keep gambling?"

"We all have our weaknesses kid. Tsunade has... issues. Gambling is her way of dealing with things."

"You mean like you getting drunk and trying to look at naked girls?"

"That's not a weakness kid, that's a part of absolutely vital research."

"Yeah right," Naruto said. "If you were so sure she'd end up in Telmut why have we been chasing her all this time?"

"When the Fire Lord and the Hokage say, 'go' you go. You don't tell them you'll leave in six weeks when it'll be easier for you. Besides, I had some hopes of actually finding her before this."

"Oh well," Naruto tried to relax. "At least now the hard part is over."

Jiraiya laughed so loud and so long Naruto wound up wondering just what was so funny.

At that same moment in one of the many game rooms of Telmut's mega casino.

The third window stopped and there was a third seven. Coins began spilling out of the slot machine.

"That's amazing!" Shizune said happily. "First you hit big at roulette, then you clean up at the craps table, and now you just got a jackpot at slots! Your luck is definitely in!"

"Oink!" said their pet pig Tonton.

Despite the clinking of the coins and the merry sound from the crowd cheering her good luck Tsunade did not feel happy. *I have a bad feeling about this.*

Good gambling instincts

"Wow," Naruto said.

He was looking at Telmut's mega casino. It had to be more than a mile long. It was a series of vastly different buildings all connected by corridors and walkways. There were arches, pyramids, towers, and even a miniature castle. All of it surrounded by blinking neon lights.

"It is pretty impressive kid," Jiraiya agreed. "There are hundreds of gaming rooms with every sort of game of chance. There are dozens of restaurants, a shopping center, a movie theater, several fine hotels, and even a bath house." He began to giggle at an old memory.

The two of them were part of a throng besieging the main entrances. Once they actually made it inside the building they joined one of about twenty lines that snaked toward a long series of tables backed up by hundred of armed guards.

Alas not even an all knowing toad sage was allowed to cut in line. So after forty minutes they came to a table with a bored looking casino employee hunched over a series of forms. After getting their names and some other information the clerk explained the rules.

"The entrance fee is one thousand ryu, payable in cash only. Once you enter the main hall you'll be seated at a table with four other players and a dealer. Each player receives five hundred chips and you play until one player has all of them. The tournament lasts until we have a final winner. Oh and since you're ninja you should also know any use of chakra results in immediate disqualification. Any questions?"

Jiraiya shook his head. "Sounds fine." He pulled out a one thousand ryu note.

"What about you?" The clerk looked at Naruto.

"My apprentice won't be playing; he'll just be watching me."

The casino employee shook his head. "Sorry, but players only are allowed beyond this point."

"That's o.k. ero-sennin; I'll just find something to do."

"I'm afraid that won't work kid, we have to find her as quick as possible. I'm going to need your eyes." Though it pained him to do so he pulled out another thousand ryu. *I am so filing an expense report when I get back.*

The clerk counted out the money and then handed them a pair of temporary ID's and two sets of 500 chips. "Enjoy the tournament. Next."

They walked past the tabled and guards into a massive hall filled with literally hundreds of small round tables and wooden chairs.

Naruto looked at his teacher feeling a bit panicked. He didn't care about losing; he just didn't want to be made a fool of. "Ero-sennin, what am I supposed to do? I've never even played before!"

"So? Listen kid, all you have to do is sit down at a table, lose and then start looking for Tsunade."

"But I don't know what I'm doing!"

"Fine, listen up..." Jiraiya spent five minutes going over the basics.

Naruto tried to get it all down. "So does a flush beat a straight?"

"Don't worry about it; you won't be playing long enough for it to matter."

At the table Naruto was led to there were three other players. Their greetings were simple, but polite. It was easy enough for him to pickup on the fact they were surprised to get a look at him. Naruto craned his neck to look at all the players at the other nearby tables. Not surprisingly Tsunade was not among them. He was now forced to worry about actually playing. Jiraiya had explained that he had to play until his chips were gone or else he would draw too much attention to himself. Naruto didn't care about losing; he just didn't want to embarrass himself.

"You look pretty nervous," one of the players said to him. "This your first time at a tournament?"

"Yeah," Naruto said.

The man's head bobbed up and down a bit. "Well, it's just a game. Nothing to be nervous about."

Naruto nodded. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, what?"

"Does a flush beat a straight?"

The man hesitated. "You're kidding right?" Naruto shook his head. All three of the players shared an amused look. "What are you even doing here if you don't know something like that?"

"Hell of a waste of ryu." Another player said.

Naruto was not about to share the fact he was on a mission with three civilians. "I didn't pay, my teacher did."

"Your teacher must be pretty damn rich if he can afford to throw away a thousand ryu like that."

He is pretty rich," Naruto said. "He writes dirty books."

The conversation pretty much died there and so Naruto just sat. He was impatient to start so he could begin finding Tsunade. The sooner that was done the sooner he could go home and see Hinata again. He was really missing her and wanting to hear her sweet voice again.

After about a fifteen minute wait the fifth player approached their table. Seeing her Naruto's eyes expanded. He immediately jumped out of his chair and pointed at her. "You!"

His shout was so loud everyone around them turned to look. Tsunade came to sudden halt and stared at the blonde kid. From his hitai-ite, his Chunin vest, and his weapon pouches it was obvious he was a ninja. He even looked sort of familiar; though she was sure she'd never met him before. "Do I know you gaki?" She suddenly looked just a little nervous. "I don't owe you money do I?"

"No, I've come here with my sensei ero, uhm, Jiraiya to bring you back to Konoha."

The look on her face went from annoyed to openly hostile. "Oh really? Well let me tell you something brat, I have no intention of going back to that damn village. Ever."

Naruto took on a stubborn expression and crossed his arms over his chest. "You don't have a choice; it's an order from the Hokage."

"The old man wants me to come back to the village huh? Why? Does he miss my cheerful attitude?"

Naruto shook his head. "The Fire Lord wants to talk to you about paying off some bill."

"The Fire Lord?" That was actually a bit serious. She knew she could get around the old man. Sarutobi understood how much she'd lost and her reasons for leaving Konoha. He had let her go. But the Fire Lord might just force him to declare her a missing nin if she refused to meet with him. "Like that matters."

Naruto looked at her suspiciously. "Say I thought we weren't allowed to use jutsus in here."

"What are you talking about? I'm not using a jutsu."

"Oh come on! You must be using a henge. You look like you're in your twenties when I know you're really, really, really old!"

She stared at him as her left eye began to twitch violently. "What was that?"

Annoyed Naruto repeated himself. "I said you're really, really..."

Before he could finish Tsunade grabbed him by the front of his Chunin vest and yanked him up off his feet. She brought him nose to nose with her and let him feel just a little of her killer intent. "Listen you annoying brat," she whispered. "The *only* reason I don't throw you through a wall right now is that I'd get ejected. How I look is none of your business, got it?"

Naruto gave her a sickly smile. "Uhm, all right." She promptly let go of him. "Geez baachan, are you always in such a bad mood?"

Her left eye began twitching again and her right hand formed a fist on its own. "Did you just call me, 'grand ma?'"

If he'd had any sense at all he'd have denied it and claimed she was hearing things. "That's right, I think it fits you."

She got her twitching under control and reminded herself about how much she'd looked forward to this tournament. "Brat, if we were anywhere else..." She shook her head in wonder. "Calling me that to my face, I have put men in critical condition for less than that. You're either very, very brave or very, very stupid." She was surprised when her words actually made him smile.

"I know plenty of people who think both."

"And Jiraiya actually chose you for a student? Did he lose a bet or something?"

Naruto pouted and crossed his arms over his chest. "Hey! Ero-sennin was lucky I agreed to be his apprentice. I'm Uzumaki Naruto, and I'm going to be Hokage one day!"

Uzumaki Naruto? Well that explains why I thought he looked familiar. Except for the scars on his cheeks he's a spitting image of Minato.
"You want to be Hokage one day?"

"That's right."

"Well, at least I have my answer now. If you want to be Hokage that means you're a complete idiot."

"Hey!"

"Listen up brat; I've known all four of the Hokages. Except for my old teacher they all died tragic deaths. And for what? To protect a village full of stupid ignorant people who were never worthy of such sacrifice. Doesn't sound like a job I'd want. Only a fool would aspire to be Hokage."

"Don't make fun of me! And don't make fun of my one and only ambition. To be Hokage is my dream!"

Just for a moment, just for a fleeting second. It seemed to her that Nawaki and Dan were alive again and standing before her. She shut her eyes and shook her head, dispelling the image.

A man dressed in a casino uniform walked up to their table. "My name is Fuji, and I will be your dealer. It is noon and we will begin momentarily."

Tsunade opened her eyes and smiled a bit at the annoying boy.
"Come on brat, I'll show you how to play some real poker."

"Good, since I've never played before."

"You've never played before?" Tsunade asked not believing it. "Then what are you doing here?"

Naruto shrugged. "The only way to get in here to look for you was to join the tournament."

Tsunade got a predatory smile. "Oh really? Well in that case why don't we have a little side bet? Do you have any money?"

Naruto had a sense of déjà vu as he pulled gamachan out again. "What have you got in mind baachan?"

"Simple, we bet on who stays in the game the longest."

"Well that's really not fair. I've never played before, what chance would I have?"

Tsunade nodded. "The odds are pretty long against you I'll admit, so I'll make the stakes worth your while." From beneath her clothing she pulled out her necklace. "This is the Shodai's necklace, I'll bet it against your money."

"No thanks, I don't wear jewelry."

She could feel her eye twitching again. "Listen you idiot, there are only two crystals like this in the whole world! With this necklace you could buy a pair of gold mines and the mountains on top of them. So what do you say brat? You got the guts to make this bet with me?"

Naruto thought about it carefully, and slowly nodded. "All right baachan, you're on. But I don't want the necklace. There's something else I want instead."

Jiraiya was a good poker player. Certainly he was far better at it than Tsunade, not that that was saying much. He was good enough to outlast three other players at his table. The last player was taken by

surprise when Jiraiya raised to the limit, only to show he had nothing but a pair of fours in his hand.

"Well that's it for me." He said cheerfully as he got up from the table. Now he could start looking for Tsunade.

He began wandering through the vast hall keeping a sharp eye out. Some of the tables were empty now. Most still had two or three players going at it, a few had drawn small crowds. His eyes drifted over to a table surrounded by one such crowd. He couldn't see the table itself or the players. He decided to go over and check on it.

"You're playing well," Shizune said happily. "Your luck must still be in."

"Oink!" Tonton put in.

Tsunade looked up from her cards just long enough to give her apprentice a look of exasperation. "Could you at least try and not sound surprised?"

"Tsunade! Long time no see!" Jiraiya stepped out into the front of the small crowd. "I was hoping to find you here."

"So I've heard."

"Hey ero-sennin."

It was only with Naruto's greeting that Jiraiya noticed who the other player at the table was. "Kid what are you doing?"

"Playing poker," Naruto answered as though it were obvious.

"Tell me something you old pervert," Tsunade asked. "Is this really the first time this brat has ever played?"

Jiraiya nodded. "The kid didn't even know the rules until I told them to him. I take it he's done pretty good."

"He's outlasted three other players."

Jiraiya looked pleased. "He can be very surprising."

Tsunade refocused her attention on her opponent. "I'll admit it brat, you've done pretty well up until now. But now it's just you and me, and there's no way I'll lose to you."

"Bring it on old lady."

The dealer had finished shuffling the deck and looked to Naruto. "It is your turn to choose the game."

"Five card draw," Naruto answered automatically. That was the simplest version of the game and he liked not having to try and remember any new rules.

The dealer nodded and held the cards out to Tsunade. She took a third of the deck from the top and placed it on the table. The dealer cut the deck and placed the bottom portion on top of the ones on the table. He then quickly dealt out five cards to each player.

Tsunade looked at her cards with a carefully blank expression on. Whatever her luck she was a veteran card player, not to mention a ninja; she was practiced in hiding her thoughts. The pile of chips in front of her was slightly larger than the brat's. The gaki really had been lucky so far, he'd gotten a few really good hands and hit big. That had been enough to let him ride out the majority of poor hands he'd gotten. But she was sure she would be able to wear him down.

Then again, looking at what she held she just might be able to end it quick, that was if her luck was still in.

She tossed twenty of the white plastic chips in the middle of the table. "Twenty to start brat."

Naruto tossed in twenty as well. "Call."

"Cards?" The dealer asked.

"I'll take one," Tsunade discarded one card and picked up a replacement.

"Two," Naruto said.

Looking at her new card she wanted to burst out laughing but steeled her features. She'd gotten a ten of clubs to complete her hand. *Hah! I guess my luck is still in. This is it you annoying brat.* "I'll tell you what Naruto; I'm feeling kind of tired. What do you say we settle everything on one hand?" She asked him in a too sweet voice.

Naruto glanced down at his cards and shrugged. "O.k. baachan, if that's what you want."

They both pushed all of their chips into a huge pile.

Watching this Jiraiya groaned. *You just got completely suckered kid. But I suppose I can't really blame you, seeing as how new you are to this. And looking directly into those magnificent breasts can make any man lose his concentration.*

With all the chips now in the middle of the table Tsunade finally allowed herself a smile. "You didn't do too bad brat, but you still lost." She put her cards on the table. "Queen high straight," she said happily. "Beat that."

"Would a flush be enough to beat that?"

She laughed. "It sure would, but have you actually got one?"

"As a matter of fact," he put his cards down. "I do." He had garbage; the highest card in his hand was a ten. But they were all hearts. He had the winning hand.

Shizune let out a depressed sigh. "I guess the streak is over."

"Oink," Tonton agreed sadly.

Jiraiya proudly stood behind his student. "Kid, you've got some great gambling instincts."

"Thanks ero-sennin," Naruto looked at Tsunade who was still just sitting there looking shell shocked. "I won baachan, will you honor our bet?"

Her hanging jaw finally snapped shut. "I've never gone back on a bet in my life; of course I'll honor it."

"What bet?" Shizune and Jiraiya said simultaneously.

"I bet the gaki that he would lose before me. If I'd won he'd have given me his purse." She let out a bitter laugh. "Since I lost I agreed to go back to Konoha with him and take on his girlfriend as an apprentice."

"We're finally going back to the village?" Shizune asked excitedly. Tsunade gave a curt nod.

Jiraiya just gave Naruto a look of mixed pride and amusement. "Not bad kid, not bad at all."

Naruto had a huge smile and was rubbing the back of his head.

Tsunade finally pushed back from the table. "I need a whole lot of drinks. Come on you old pervert, I'll let you pay."

As Tsunade and the others left the table two men in black trench coats and sunglasses watched. One turned to the other and spoke in a low whisper.

"We can take her on the way back to her room."

The second man shook his head slightly. "Our master wants this done quietly and without witnesses. Now that we've finally found her we won't lose her again. We'll wait until she's on the road."

The first man nodded. They would fulfill their master's orders, and bring him the Shodai's necklace.

A gift for Hinata

Hiashi was breathing heavily and held up a hand signaling for a halt. "Let us take a short break Hinata."

She nodded and deactivated her byakugan. "Hai, father."

"You know I am quite pleased with you Hinata, since achieving the rank of Chunin you have been working even harder. I suspect one day you will make a fine leader for this clan."

"Arigato tousan, I want to be a great clan head as you have been." She replied. "But I also want to become strong so that I can be a fitting wife for the Hokage."

This was not the first time she had spoken such thoughts. All the same he shook his head slightly. "The devotion you show for this boy speaks well of your loyalty Hinata, but poorly of your judgment."

"Naruto will be Hokage one day." She said it with the same certainty that she might have said the sun would rise tomorrow.

"Hinata," her father spoke patiently. "There is no possibility that boy will succeed in learning the hiraishin and even less chance he will be Hokage. The sooner you accept that the better."

"You don't know him father. I truly believe that he can do anything he sets his mind to."

Hiashi looked at his daughter in mild wonder. Just where had this stubbornness and determination come from? Had it developed due to recent events? Or had it always been there? Like a seed lying in the soil waiting for a chance to grow. His daughter had always been weak minded and easily intimidated. But when it came to the subject of that boy she refused to yield an inch. "Believe that if you wish daughter, it will alter nothing."

"Yes father."

"Very well, let us have tea." Hiashi looked over to the person waiting on them. "You may serve us now."

Neji stalked out with a tray holding a small kettle and two cups. As he poured them their tea he spoke in a quiet and barely restrained voice. "Forgive me Hiashi-sama, but is this truly a duty for one who is a Chunin?"

"Hinata requested you be given this duty." Hiashi replied simply. "The cadet branch serves the needs of the main branch."

Hinata smile as she sipped her tea. "Besides cousin, I think you look cute in your little pink kimono."

Shizune and Naruto had long since gone off to bed. Jiraiya and Tsunade were sitting at one of the mega casino's brightly lit bars drinking sake and talking. Not too surprisingly the main topic of conversation was Naruto.

"He actually bet his future on learning the hiraishin?"

"The kid sure did."

Tsunade laughed and took a sip from her current bottle. "Well I knew the kid was an idiot, I wouldn't have guessed how much of one."

Jiraiya grinned. "He was still able to outsmart you though."

"He didn't outsmart me, the brat just got lucky."

"Well, you'd certainly be an expert on that subject."

"Do you know I actually offered to bet him the Shodai's necklace? He actually turned it down and asked me to make his girlfriend my apprentice instead."

"I'm not surprised, the boy's in love. You remember what that's like don't you?"

She set down her bottle and sat there quietly for a moment. "Being young and in love? Yes, I can remember." She took a long drink. "Tell me something you old fraud, why have you taken him on as an apprentice?"

"You know why," he answered softly. He looked about to make sure no one was sitting too close. "His father was like a son to me, I owed it to Minato."

"Bull shit," she said and tipped her empty bottle over. "That's been true since the day Minato died. If that were the reason you wouldn't have waited all this time."

Jiraiya frowned at her. "I ran away, something else you know about."

She grunted. "So what changed?"

"Let's just say I was reminded of just what I owed."

She grinned. "Well you haven't done a very good job have you? He's doomed to become a Hyuga servant on his sixteenth birthday."

"That was the kid's idea. Believe me; I tried talking him out of it. But it's the only way for him to be with his girl and he wouldn't change his mind. Anyway, I'm not so sure he'll lose his bet."

"You really think that little brat can learn the hiraishin?"

"Like I've already said, he can be surprising."

The following day the four of them were finally headed back to Konoha.

"So baachan, is it true you can smash boulders with just your fist?"

Tsunade's left eye began to twitch. "Stop calling me that you annoying brat."

"Well, so is it true?" Naruto asked again.

Annoyed Tsunade focused some chakra into her fist and promptly smashed a tree. "That answer your question?"

"Pretty good for an old lady."

Tsunade came to an immediate halt.

"Oh no," Shizune said.

Jiraiya just sighed.

"Look you annoying brat, stop calling me that."

Naruto grinned. "But why grandma, it really seems to fit you. I mean don't you think it's kind of dishonest going around looking the way you do? I mean since you're really, really, really old."

Jiraiya could see Tsunade was starting to get really angry. "Kid, didn't the old man and I warn you about being too free with your thoughts? Anyway Tsunade's not that old, she's the same age as me."

Naruto looked at his teacher. "I know, it proves my point."

"Hey!" Jiraiya snapped.

Fortunately Naruto was spared having to face the anger of not one but two Sannin when a pair of ninja in black robes and sunglasses appeared on the road just ahead of them.

"Greetings Lady Tsunade," one of them said. "Lord Taka sends his regards."

"Lord Taka and the Isle of exchange." Jiraiya muttered. "This should be interesting."

"Who is this Taka and what's this isle of exchange?" Naruto asked.

"Lord Taka rules the Isle of exchange, or the Isle of Torikae about twelve hundred miles off the coast. It's basically his own private little kingdom."

Tsunade smiled fondly. "It has some beautiful hotels and casinos."

Jiraiya nodded. "Yeah along with a whole lot of banks and his very own private police force of loyal ninja and a modern navy."

"So he's a casino owner and banker?" Naruto asked.

"In part." Jiraiya replied. "What he mostly is, is a middleman. He arranges for exchanges or sale of goods for a commission and in return guarantees security and privacy."

"He sounds like a criminal." Naruto commented.

"Oh he is." Jiraiya confirmed. "But he is also Lord over all he surveys and a very powerful businessman."

"Anyway," Tsunade finally said. "What does Lord Taka want?"

The ninja who had originally spoken produced a contract. "Lord Taka respectfully wishes to remind you of the markers you took out the last time you were on the Isle. Your markers are worth over a million ryu."

Jiraiya turned to glare at his former teammate. "You owe *another* million ryu? You owed *eight* million?"

Tsunade looked uncomfortable. "These things just sort of happen."

Jiraiya shook his head. "The Fire Lord has agreed to take on the debts Tsunade has incurred. I am sure he would be willing to pay this debt off as well." Jiraiya was surprised when the man shook his head.

"Lord Taka is aware of the Daimyo's buying up the debts. My Lord has no interest in applying to the Daimyo for payment."

"Oh really?" Tsunade's tone was friendly but the smile she produced looked malevolent. "And what exactly is Lord Taka interested in?"

"He insists on receiving the Shodai's necklace in compensation of your debt. We were sent out to make certain the necklace was not given to the Fire Lord instead."

"No one is getting this necklace." Tsunade informed them. "Not the Daimyo and not Lord Taka."

"That is unfortunate," the man said and nodded to the other.

The ninja ran through some hand signs. There was a flash of light.

Jiraiya, Tsunade, Shizune, and even Tonton were frozen in place. Caught by a genjutsu that seemed to make time stop.

The first ninja nodded pleased and walked over to the motionless Tsunade to relieve her of her necklace.

"Lord Taka will be very happy about this."

"Do we still kill everyone?" The second ninja asked.

"Those are Lord Taka's orders."

"But won't the Hokage and the Fire Lord be angry that we killed the last two Sannin?" He thought nothing of killing a pair of ordinary ninja.

The first ninja shrugged. "That's only if they figure out who was responsible. By the time the bodies are found there won't be any evidence connecting us. And with all the enemies these two have made no one will suspect our lord."

He was just about to remove the necklace when he heard a growl.

One moment Naruto was standing in a road with the others, the next he was alone and knee deep in a sewer.

"What the hell?" He looked about wondering what had happened. He noticed he was in front of some huge cage with a single seal placed on it.

From the darkness behind the cage he heard a foul laugh.

So, after all this time, I finally meet my jailer. How very disappointing. A cruel and taunting voice spoke from somewhere within the cage.

"Who... who's there?" Naruto took a couple steps back and pulled out a kunai.

In answer two massive orange eyes opened and a smile made of long rows of sharp teeth appeared before him.

Take a wild guess.

Naruto gulped. "You're the Kyuubi."

I am. And you are the miserable child who holds me imprisoned. Know this child, I am the immortal and invincible Kyuubi, and I will not remain a prisoner indefinitely.

"I don't get it; you're stuck in my belly. How can we be talking like this? Where is this place?"

This is your mind; the setting is of your own making. The fox chuckled a bit. **In your case your mind really is a sewer.**

"Well why am I here now?"

You were caught in a genjutsu and are about to be murdered. I cannot allow that, if you die I die.

Naruto smiled and relaxed a bit. "Oh yeah? Well in that case how about you give me some of your chakra? We can call it compensation for all the misery I've had to endure because of you."

I will give you some of my chakra, and free you from the genjutsu. From behind the bars red chakra suddenly flowed out and surrounded him. **We will talk again.**

Naruto was back on the road. Jiraiya, Shizune, and Tsunade were all frozen in place. The two black robed ninja were standing near baachan. Looking at them he let out a growl and began casting a jutsu. "**Kage Bushin no Jutsu.**" There was a huge puff of smoke and fifty very angry Narutos appeared.

When Tsunade snapped out of it she was very surprised to see the two enemy ninja tied up to a tree and looking as though they'd been beaten to a pulp.

"What the hell?" She noticed that Jiraiya and Shizune also seemed to be disoriented.

"Well it's about time," an annoyed Naruto spoke up. "You three have been standing there frozen for an hour." He looked at his teacher. "Ero-sennin, I want you to teach me how to break a genjutsu. If I'd known that maybe I wouldn't have had to waste a whole hour just standing around."

"Brat, just what the hell happened here?" Tsunade demanded.

Naruto explained, leaving out the little detail of having met the Kyuubi.

Hearing it Tsunade clutched at her necklace to make sure it really was still there. She found it hard to believe that she'd almost been killed. But with the proof tied up to a tree she couldn't really deny it. She shook her head and smiled. "All right, I have to admit, you're pretty interesting brat."

"Thanks baachan."

A few days later at the Hyuga estates.

For the second time Naruto arrived at the Hyuga estates with one of the Sannin in tow. Hiashi had greeted Tsunade with a deep bow and with all possible honor. Hinata had also bowed and was staring up awestruck at the legendary kunoichi.

"Let me make certain I understand this Lady Tsunade. You wish to take my daughter Hinata on as an apprentice due to a bet you made with Naruto?" Hiashi asked slowly.

Feeling a bit embarrassed Tsunade nonetheless nodded. "That's right," she smiled down at Hinata. "I offered him the Shodai's necklace; lucky for me he values your happiness more than he does a piece of jewelry worth millions."

Hinata shifted her attention from Tsunade to Naruto. "Did you really Naruto-kun?"

Feeling self conscious he smiled and rubbed the back of her head. "Well I did say that I would get you a really good birthday present." Seeing her smile made his heart beat faster.

She went over to him and glomped on with all of her might. "Arigato Naruto-kun! You really are the best boyfriend ever!"

Seeing his daughter behaving so right in front of him Hiashi was very surprised, as well as uncomfortable. But so long as Tsunade did not seemed upset he would keep his peace. "You honor both my

daughter and my clan by this generous offer. Hinata will of course accept."

Tsunade nodded and smiled at the two youngsters. *You really are interesting brat.*

The next step

After a rather short time the doors to the conference room opened. The Fire Daimyo was the first to exit. He looked rather pale and seemed to be shaking just a bit. He lacked his usual slow and stately gait. He left without a word and in a walk that was just barely less than a run.

The next ones out of the room were an upset looking Sarutobi and a rather sulky Tsunade. She was looking like a child who had been caught doing something.

"Did you have to smash the conference table?" Sarutobi was obviously upset.

Tsunade tried to look indifferent. "He threatened to take my necklace."

"Only as a way to guarantee that you remain here to fulfill your agreement."

"I am the granddaughter of the Shodai Hokage; my word should be more than enough."

"Well perhaps it would be, had you not spent the last thirteen years acquiring and then avoiding your debts." The Hokage said dryly. "In any case Tsunade I expect you to live up to your end of the agreement."

"I know," she said miserably.

"You'll stay in the village for at least the next seven years performing whatever assignments are required of you. And you are not to gamble or run up any new debts."

"I know, I know," she said irritably. "I'm trapped here for the next seven years, in this damn village."

Sarutobi looked at her and felt a small bit of sympathy. He knew just how much she had lost and the reasons behind her attitudes. Still, he had some hope that now that she was back in the village she might rediscover the love she'd once had for Konoha. "It won't all be bad Tsunade. I'm giving you full charge of our medical program. You'll finally have the chance to create a corps of medic nins, and all of them trained to your specifications."

She looked at him suspiciously. "Are you serious old man? You were the one who killed the idea of a medical corps."

He shook his head wearily. "I always thought it a fine idea Tsunade, but at the time we were at war. We did not have the time or resources to put your idea into practice then. Things are different now."

She halted and looked at him. "If I do this I do it my way. I want to make all the decisions about who enters the program and what they are taught."

"Of course," Sarutobi gave her a fatherly grin. "There is no one else I would trust with this."

"Hmmm, well maybe it won't be a complete waste of time." She paused a bit. "Tell me something old man, what do you think of that brat, Uzumaki Naruto?"

"I think Naruto has the potential to be the very best. Despite everything he has had to endure he remains loyal to this village and seeks only to protect it and thereby earn the respect of the villagers." He looked at his student curiously. "What do you think of him?"

"I think he's a loud mouth brat who doesn't know when to shut up."

"I see."

"But," her lips twitched into a tiny little grin. "I have to admit he's worth keeping an eye on, though if he doesn't stop calling me

baachan I may have to kill him."

Jiraiya was the last one to exit the conference room. He was scribbling furiously into his notebook.

The enraged Toonana leapt to her feet, her magnificent breasts jiggling beneath her too small shirt. She brought her fist down and smashed the oak table to kindling with a single blow. "No one takes what is mine. Do you understand that?" The Smoke Lord could only nod in weak submission, awed and humbled by the murderous fury and stunning beauty of Toonana.

Jiraiya began to giggle. This would make another great scene for his book; The Tale of the Gallant Naruko.

"Here you go Naruto, just as I promised." Ebisu handed him a scroll.

"Yatah!" Naruto grabbed it and began to dance about. "Thanks Ebisu-sensei!"

"You're very welcome Naruto. I would normally be surprised to have someone learn all the jutsus on that fist scroll so quickly, but after training you I'm actually not surprised at all. You really are quite impressive."

Naruto grinned happily at the compliment. "Ah, thanks Ebisu-sensei, that's really nice of you to say. So are these more wind jutsu?" Naruto was a bit disappointed when Ebisu shook his head.

"No, all the wind jutsu I had available were in that first scroll I gave you. These are more general use jutsu. They may not be as impressive, but they'll prove valuable I assure you."

Despite wishing they were wind jutsus Naruto still nodded gratefully. He would never **ever** be ungrateful for anything that increased his arsenal. "Thanks again sensei, I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome Naruto, and remember that if you ever need help my door is always open."

Tsunade smiled evilly. *Well this should be fun.* "Now then, as I've told you, since I lost that bet to the brat I'll be taking you on as my apprentice. However don't think for one second that means I'll be taking it easy on you."

"Hai, Tsunade-sensei," Hinata was feeling a bit nervous. *Why do I have a bad feeling about this?*

"When I'm done with you not only will you be a top medic nin, you will also be a fearsome kunoichi ready to deal with anything." They were alone in training ground 9. Tsunade had lined up several soccer size balls in front of her. "Now since I don't plan to take it easy on you I need to see if you have the necessary commitment and toughness to survive my training."

"Su... survive?"

Tsunade's smile expanded. "That's right, my training methods are a bit extreme and not for the faint of heart. If you have any doubts you let me know them right now."

Despite her concern Hinata shook her head. "I want to become a great medic nin like you Tsunade-sensei."

"Glad to hear it. Now then, for our very first exercise I will kick these balls at you and you must avoid them." Hinata nodded, that wouldn't be too hard for a trained ninja. "And just so you know they're filled with explosives."

"What?"

Tsunade kicked one of the balls with all her might and sent it rocketing towards Hinata's chest. She quickly leapt to the right, just

dodging it. When it struck the ground behind her it exploded with the force of about ten explosive notes.

Hinata felt her heart pounding as she stared at the smoking crater. Had the ball struck her she would certainly have been killed. *What have I gotten myself into?*

"Hinata!" Tsunade shouted. "Pay attention! We've only just started." With that she kicked another ball and sent it zooming for her face.

That evening Hinata arrived at his home as usual. Naruto answered the door ready to welcome her with his usual greeting when the not always observant Naruto noticed something.

"Hinata-chan? Why do you smell like smoke? And why are your clothes singed?"

She gave him a weary smile. "Oh, that's nothing Naruto-kun. I just had my first day's training with Tsunade-sensei."

"Really? You're lucky Hinata-chan."

And despite the day's horrors Hinata nodded. "I know I am, to train under the legendary Tsunade is a once in a lifetime opportunity." *Even if I am scared for my life.*

Naruto nodded. "Yeah, and I'll bet baachan is really easy to work with, not like Fukasaku-sensei or ero-sennin."

Hinata just stared mutely.

"What?' He asked.

A couple weeks later.

Jiraiya entered the Hokage's office. "You needed to see me old man?"

Sarutobi nodded. "Jiraiya, how has Naruto been progressing?"

"Not too bad, along with my instruction and Fukasaku's he's also been studying a jutsu scroll from Ebisu. He's actually learned the shunshin completely on his own."

"That's very impressive, and how has his progress on the hiraishin gone?"

"Eh, well, that's not going so good." Jiraiya sighed. "And of course that's the one area where I can't really help him."

"I see," Sarutobi said. "That is a shame, but as you point out there's nothing we can do about it. But the hiraishin aside, you'd say his progress has been good?"

"Yeah."

"Good enough for him to take the next step?"

Jiraiya grinned. "Has something special come up?"

"Here," Sarutobi handed over a message. "I think this would be perfect."

Jiraiya read the message and laughed. "Another Supai sighting huh? Are you trying to teach the kid patience or how to chase wild geese?"

"Neither, I am hoping to teach him to carry out a mission to the best of his ability, even when there is little hope of success."

"Well this certainly qualifies. How long has it been? Six years? Seven?"

"Eight years," Sarutobi replied with a slight annoyance.

"Nevertheless, we have to try. Since you agree he is ready for this why don't you have him report here and I'll explain things to him."

Naruto had the scroll Ebisu had given him and was looking over the first jutsu on it, the shunshin. He had mastered it in a little more than a week. Normally he would have proceeded on to the next jutsu. But there was something about this jutsu that was bothering him. Most of the symbols on it also appeared on the Hiraishin scroll. But there was something different...

"Kid," Jiraiya entered the house without bothering to knock or announce himself. "You, me, the tower, now."

Naruto looked up and rolled up his scroll. "You know ero-sennin; most people would knock before coming into someone's home."

"Well kid, most people don't when they're the ones who own the house. Now let's go."

Naruto grumbled a bit but got moving.

"Hey ero-sennin, I've got a question for you."

"What is it kid?"

"I was just thinking, since I've learned the shunshin I've noticed that most of the symbols used on it appear in the hiraishin. So I guess that means the hiraishin is just a super powered version of a shunshin, right?"

"Hmmm, well, yes and no."

"Aw come on, what do you mean yes and no? I mean either it is or it isn't."

Jiraiya sent his blonde protégé an annoyed look. "Well kid both jutsus, along with the substitution jutsu, allow you to travel through space. So in that way they can be considered related. In the same sort of way a house cat and a mountain lion are. Now technically they are both cats, but one look will tell you they are completely different animals."

"O.k., then what's the difference?"

"Well kid, there are two main differences. The first being the use of matter for transport."

"Huh?"

Jiraiya took a look at Naruto's confused expression and sighed. "All right, when you use substitution you need a log or something else to replace yourself with. The shunshin is similar except it uses air and another material as components. We use leaves, but sand, earth, water, or almost anything else can be used. The point is the jutsu work by exchanging the matter in your body with matter in a different area. Both jutsus are also very limited in range. The substitution can only be worked within a few hundred yards; the shunshin has a limit of a few miles. They also give off physical evidence of occurring, either a puff of smoke or a swirl of air."

"Uhm, o.k., and how is the hiraishin different?"

"Hiraishin is *true* teleportation; it's not an exchange jutsu. So long as you have some sort of seal to lock onto there are no limits to it. You could use it to go half way around the world kid. It's instantaneous and it gives off no obvious sign except a yellow flash from the user at the point of origin, there is nothing at all to be seen at the arrival point. Also, once it's mastered you can use multiple teleportation to be in a hundred different places at almost the same instant. That was how the Yondaime was able to defeat whole armies all by himself. Really the only limit to the hiraishin is the requirement for a seal." Jiraiya looked over and was pleased to see that Naruto looked suitably impressed.

Actually Naruto was impressed; he could just imagine how amazing he'd be with a jutsu like that. But he knew there was still something about the two jutsus that was a bit off.

In his office the Hokage greeted him with a warm smile. "Hello Naruto, Jiraiya's been telling me about the fine progress you've been making in your studies."

"He has?" Naruto said with surprise. "All he keeps telling me is that I'm not as good as the Yondaime and never will be."

Jiraiya snorted. "A judgment I stand by kid, but even so you haven't done *too* bad."

"Just to be compared to the Yondaime is an achievement in itself Naruto." Sarutobi informed him. "A mission has come up and both your sensei and I feel it would be perfect for you."

"A mission? Well that's great!" He looked eagerly at Jiraiya. "When do we go?"

"You and your team will be leaving tomorrow," Jiraiya informed him. "But I won't be coming with you."

"Well if you're not coming whose going to be in charge? Kakashi?"

Sarutobi and Jiraiya both smiled at him.

"Naruto," Sarutobi said calmly. "You will be in charge."

"What?"

"You are Chunin, and the Chunin are the ones who lead most of the missions this village is required to perform. I think it high time you were given the chance to prove your leadership abilities."

Slowly a smile blossomed across Naruto's face. "I get to lead my very own team on a mission?"

"That's right," Sarutobi said.

"Yatah!" Naruto screamed and then shamelessly broke into his victory dance.

Jiraiya watched and grimaced. "Kami help us."

Team Naruto

While Jiraiya was a bit horrified Sarutobi was amused at Naruto's antics. "Before you get too excited Naruto." Sarutobi said. "Would you like to know what the mission involves?"

"Sure!" Naruto mercifully stopped dancing and took the folder the Hokage was handing him. Opening the rather thick folder he looked inside. After a moment of reading his excitement seemed to dissipate just a little. "What is this? The mission is to go after a Chunin named Supai?"

"He is a former Chunin Naruto," Sarutobi explained. "He has been a missing nin for eight years now."

"The mission is to try and capture a missing nin?"

"That's right Naruto."

"Uhm, not to sound ungrateful or anything. But isn't that sort of the work of hunter nins?"

Sarutobi nodded. "Naruto, why don't you keep going through that file?"

The folder in his hands was unusually thick. Naruto turned back to it and began flipping through the pages. The vast majority of it seemed to be made up of mission reports. "Just how many missions have been sent out after this guy?"

"Seventy three," Sarutobi answered with a grimace. "All of them failures, and in all but a handful of them he was never even spotted. For the first few years he was a high priority A-rank assignment which we left to the hunter nins. But due to the lack of success and due to the fact he has not committed further crimes, so far as we know, the priority given to his capture has been significantly lowered. This mission is considered a low C-rank."

"Basically kid," Jiraiya spoke. "Supai is a genjutsu master and former spy; he is very, very good at disappearing when he wants. Basically, we get reports from time to time that we believe might be him and so we send a team out to investigate. But they always come back with squat, without ever spotting him, if he was ever there to begin with. A lot of our ninja believe he has to be dead and all these missions are a complete waste. That's why we've stopped using hunter nins, it's considered a waste of their time."

"So how do you expect me to find him?" Naruto asked.

Sarutobi and Jiraiya both looked a bit embarrassed. "Simply put Naruto, we do not expect you to find him." Sarutobi said.

"What? Then why are you sending me on a mission if you expect me to fail?"

"Not every mission can be successfully completed Naruto." Sarutobi explained. "There are often times when we must go on missions with little or no prospect of success. But duty still requires that we make our best effort. Naruto, think of this as one more test of your abilities. Everything that I require you to do will be a test of one sort or another. This is a test of your leadership skills. The challenge is not to successfully complete the mission, but rather to see whether or not you can lead a team to give a good and honest effort under circumstances that are less than ideal."

"This is your very first time as a leader kid," Jiraiya said. "Just forming your team and getting them to work together will be good enough."

"Also, I want to be certain that along with giving a good effort that you will not try too hard to complete the mission." Sarutobi said.

"Huh? Not try too hard? What are you talking about old man? Aren't we always supposed to try our best on all our missions?"

"You should always try your best to complete every mission, this is true." Sarutobi agreed. "However, you should also be aware of what is appropriate. I expect this mission to last no more than a week. You are not to spend six months trying to track this man down simply because it is your mission. Also, keep in mind that while there are times when a mission must be successful at all costs, this is certainly not one of them. Except for certain very important missions the safety of your team will always be your number one priority. A leader who accomplishes the mission but loses half his squad to do so would be considered a very poor leader."

"Don't worry old man! I definitely won't lose anyone."

"That is very good to hear Naruto." Sarutobi said. "Because *you* will be the one responsible for the lives and well being of your team. As leader they are placed in your hands. Do you understand Naruto?"

Naruto slowly nodded. "I understand."

"Do you really?" Jiraiya asked. "You've taken a lot of stupid risks in the past kid. Things that put your life in danger. But now you have to worry about more than just yourself. If you take dumb chances you won't just put just yourself at risk but your whole squad."

Naruto frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. "So you want me to be something that I'm not?"

"I want you to be a leader kid." Jiraiya said. "And that means thinking about your team before you think about yourself."

"You have already proven yourself to be a fine ninja and warrior Naruto." Sarutobi said. "But being a good leader demands even more. This is only your first opportunity, do your best and keep what we have said in mind."

"I will, and I won't let you down."

"I'm sure you won't." Sarutobi took a pile of manila folders on his desk and handed them to Naruto.

"What are these?" Naruto asked.

"Those are the personnel files of fifty ninja who are currently in the village and available for this mission. I will give you four hours to go over them and select any three you wish." Sarutobi said.

"I get to pick my own team?" Naruto asked excitedly.

"In this situation, yes." Sarutobi said. "On some occasions you will be allowed to select your team, on others they will be assigned to you."

"In that case can I have Hinata on my team?"

Sarutobi shook his head. "Your three team members must all be Genin."

"This is a real mission kid," Jiraiya said. "Even if we don't expect you to succeed you need to take it seriously. This isn't some romantic getaway for you and your girlfriend."

"I wasn't asking for her because she's my girlfriend. I was asking for her because Hinata-chan is the best!"

"That may be Naruto," Sarutobi said. "But your sensei brings up a valid point. In selecting your team you must keep the mission as the priority rather than selecting those you might prefer to work with. Like everything else, how you select your team is a test."

"I got it," he looked back down at all the folders he was holding.

"To save time why don't you take those to one of the offices here in the tower? Once you have made your selections I'll have the people brought in." Sarutobi said

Naruto sat at a desk with a dozen of the files open. He had gone through every one of them and these were the finalists. He had also taken the time to read the file on Supai, the target. The man was a thief, pure and simple. He used his ninja abilities to run cons and trick people out of their money. Whenever a crime fitting that profile took place Konoha was contracted as he was considered a likely suspect. The man was an expert at disguise and deception, even being able to disguise his scent. It was no wonder he had been able to avoid capture for so long.

"What would be the best team for catching someone like that?" He muttered to himself.

Looking at the files that were open he already knew the three best suited for the mission. With a heavy sigh he picked those folders up. *This is going to be really weird.*

Shortly before seven p.m. teams Kakashi and Asuma were ordered to report to the tower. Team Kakashi, made up of Sasuke, Sakura, and Tayuya as well as team Asuma made up of Ino, Chouji, and Kidomaru waited in the Hokage's office.

"You have any idea what this is about?" Kakashi asked.

"Not a clue." Asuma replied.

"Maybe we're finally going to get a real mission." Sasuke noted.

"That would sure be a refreshing change."

Kakashi glanced over at Sasuke, but decided not to say anything in front of the others. Sasuke's attitude had not improved since Naruto's departure from the team. He was still obsessed with gaining power in order to avenge his family.

"Better hope not princess," Tayuya grinned. "You barely manage to handle the missions we've gotten."

"Don't insult Sasuke-kun!" Ino shouted. Ino was a bit surprised that Sakura had not also spoken up.

Tayuya looked at the blonde girl with open contempt. "Oh no, are you another one of his fucking fan girls?"

Ino stiffened, offended by the crude language and the condescending tone. "What did you just say?"

"I asked if you were one of those brainless fucking fan girls who have nothing better to do than chase after the prince of emo here. But never mind, the answer is pretty damn obvious."

"Why you..." Ino was getting ready to explode when the door to the office opened. Sarutobi walked in, followed by a certain blonde in an orange jump suit and Chunin vest.

"Ah thank you all for coming on such short notice." Sarutobi said.

"We are at your service Hokage-sama." Kakashi said as he bowed.

"Could you tell us what this is about?" Asuma asked following a slight bow.

"Of course," Sarutobi said. "Three of your team members are being temporarily reassigned."

"No!" Sakura immediately interrupted. "You can't break the team up again!" Losing Naruto had been bad enough, as bad as things were she had finally adjusted. She didn't think she could handle any more change.

"Take it easy Sakura," Kakashi reassured her. "I'm sure this is just temporary. If it were permanent I would have been informed before the rest of you."

"That is indeed true." Sarutobi confirmed. "Three of you are being assigned to a mission that should have a duration of no more than a

week. In the meantime the rest of you will simply remain in the village to train."

"But why are you splitting the team up in the first place?" Sakura complained.

"Sakura this is not a big deal." Kakashi said. "On occasion a specific mission needs a specific skill set and certain ninja will be assigned." He lifted an eyebrow. "Did you really think all the missions in your ninja career would be performed with a single team?"

She looked down at the floor, feeling foolish. "I guess not."

"Don't feel bad about it Sakura-chan." Naruto piped up. "I'm still trying to figure things out too."

Sakura looked up at him gratefully. *Good old Naruto, always trying to make me feel better.*

Sasuke eyed his former teammate suspiciously. "So what are you doing here dobe?" He grinned. "Are you going to be leading us?"

Naruto smiled and began rubbing the back of his head. "Yeah, I am."

Sasuke's grin vanished. He'd been joking. The thought that the dead last could give him *orders* was unbelievable.

"No way!" Ino shouted. "If anyone here should lead it should be Sasuke-kun!"

"Ino!" Asuma spoke sharply. "Whatever you might prefer, Naruto is Chunin and Sasuke is not. Should you be placed under his command I expect you to treat him with the same respect you show me. Is that clear?"

She looked up at her sensei in surprise. "Yes, Asuma-sensei."

"Naruto is indeed Chunin." Sarutobi spoke quietly. "That means he is entrusted by me and by this village to lead missions. If you are

placed under his command you will obey his orders and show him the respect due to a superior. Or you will suffer the consequences for insubordination and disobedience. Is that clear?"

The six Genin present all nodded, some more reluctantly than others.

Kakashi smiled. "Congratulations on your first command Naruto."

"Thanks Kakashi-sensei."

"So just who gets to be on this new team?" Sasuke asked.

Sarutobi looked at Naruto and nodded.

Naruto took a deep breath and tried to make his voice sound authoritative. "You, Ino, and Tayuya."

"Great!" Ino jumped up and pumped a fist in the air. Even if she had to follow orders from Naruto she would still get to go on a mission with Sasuke-kun.

"Great," Tayuya muttered. She was less than excited at the prospect of being with the princess and another of his fan girls.

Sakura looked at Naruto with a slightly hurt expression. *He didn't choose me?*

Kakashi looked at Sasuke and was relieved to see he wasn't going to make a scene.

Sasuke looked at Naruto and asked in a calm enough tone. "So what's the mission?"

Naruto had a huge smile on his face. Despite some of the weird reactions he finally had his very own team. "Come with me team Naruto and I'll go over the mission details."

"Wow Naruto, you actually sound like a Chunin." Ino said.

As Naruto led his three team members out of the office Sasuke just mouthed the words, 'team Naruto' and shook his head. *Kami help us.*

Questions and answers

"So that's basically it," Naruto wrapped up his very first meeting as a team leader. "We leave from the gates tomorrow at eight for the city of Nagano. Any questions?"

Sasuke looked unimpressed. "This sounds like a total waste of time."

"I agree with Sasuke-kun!" Ino said excitedly.

Tayuya coughed into her hand. "Idiot fan girl says what."

Ino looked at her. "What?"

Tayuya grinned. "Exactly."

Sasuke headed towards the door, already certain that with Naruto, Tayuya, and Ino around this would be a long week. "I'll see you tomorrow at the gates."

Ino quickly followed him out the door. "Sasuke-kun do you want to walk me home?"

As Tayuya turned to go she again looked Naruto over. "You know, I've heard a lot about you from Sasuke and Sakura."

"Really?" Naruto asked with interest. "What did they say?"

"That you were dead last in your academy class and that you can be a real idiot at times."

Naruto hung his head. "They said that?"

Seeing his reaction she laughed. "Yeah they did. But Sakura also said you saved her life and that there was no one she trusted more than you. And I think that emo bastard misses seeing you, not that

he would ever admit it of course." She saw his head shoot up and decided it was time to go. "See you tomorrow."

Leaving the tower Naruto was a bit surprised to see Kakashi-sensei waiting for him.

"Naruto, again congratulations on the mission."

"Thanks Kakashi-sensei, but you didn't have to wait out here just to tell me that."

"Ah, about that," Kakashi rubbed the back of his head. "I actually wanted to have a quick word with you about something."

"What is it sensei?"

"Well, it's about Sasuke." At the mention of that name Kakashi could see him stiffen a bit.

"I should have known." Naruto shook his head in disgust. "Some things just never change do they?"

"Now, now, don't be like that. I am actually very proud of you and of how far you have come." *Though I'm very sorry so little of it was my doing.* "But you are Chunin now and no longer under my command. Sasuke is still my student and my responsibility."

Yeah right, like you wouldn't still be playing favorites if I were still on the team. "O.k. so what did you want to say?"

"I just want you to try and take it easy on Sasuke and not try and push things too much. He has been driving himself very hard and isolating himself more and more from those around him."

"So? How is that different from how he's always been?"

"The difference is that I see him heading down a path where no one else matters to him. When you were still on the team he was forming

bonds, not just with you but with Sakura as well. Since you've left he's become more distant. I'm worried about his well being. I just want you to not do anything to push him further down the road he seems to be on."

"Typical," Naruto couldn't keep the resentment from his voice. "Everyone is just so worried about Sasuke and how he's doing."

"Naruto, he has suffered a great deal."

"He is not the only one. Though obviously he's the only one whose suffering matters to you."

"Naruto..."

"I won't treat the teme with kid gloves the way the rest of you do." Naruto answered firmly. "I know he's suffered, but he's just going to have to deal with it. To be honest I don't think it helps that everyone in this village always makes excuses for him and always gives him whatever he wants. A lot of people have suffered and learned to move on." He began walking away. "Like me for instance."

Kakashi stood there and watched him go. He wondered yet again how things might have been different.

"Kiba!"

Kiba stopped and looked about. "Hey! Naruto, long time no see."

"Hey Kiba, hey Akamaru," the small dark barked a greeting. "Listen, I'm leading a mission tomorrow and I was wondering if you could help me with something."

"Sure, what is it?"

Since the mission was not classified Naruto told Kiba all about it.

"Are they still trying to chase down that Supai guy?"

"So you know about him?"

Kiba nodded. "Oh sure, my mom went after him a few times and even my sister once. My mom says the guy is definitely dead and someone else has been doing these crimes."

"What makes your mom so sure?"

"Well it's simple; they keep some of his personal belongings to let us get his scent. My mom never once picked up his scent in all the times she was sent to investigate."

"You know this is the reason I wanted to talk to you. When I went over his profile it mentioned that of the first five missions sent out to capture him he was spotted four times and nearly caught. On those missions there were Inuzukas who picked up his scent each time."

Kiba nodded proudly. "That's right, a lot of my clan specialize as hunter nins. It only makes sense given our tracking abilities."

"I was thinking about asking for an Inuzuka for my team, but I noticed that after the fifth mission his scent was never picked up again."

"That's why he has to be dead. If he were really still around doing all these crimes he would have been spotted. These crimes have to be the work of copycats."

"Is there any way to hide a scent?"

"Well sure, you can either cover it up or you can alter it."

"Well couldn't Supai have done one of those things then?"

Kiba frowned. "It's not likely. To cover up a scent you have to replace it with something else that's a lot more powerful like animal pheromones or strong smelling plants. That can work in a forest, but it would stand out in a city."

"O.k. then, what about the other one?"

"Altering your scent is *very* hard to do. To permanently alter your scent you have to change your physical make up."

"Like how?"

"Well the most common way is to get a disease, something permanent like cancer will change your scent. Suffering serious burns can also do it. Changing your organs or limbs can do it as well. My mom told me once about a ninja who lost an arm and had it replaced with a new one through a medical jutsu. That changed his scent completely."

"All right then," Naruto sounded excited. "Maybe that's what he did."

But Kiba shook his head. "That's a bit drastic don't you think? Do you really think someone would deliberately get cancer or replace an arm just to change his scent?"

Naruto grinned. "Maybe, especially if he was almost got caught by the hunter nins four times. Thanks Kiba." Naruto disappeared in a puff of smoke.

A kage bushin? Kiba thought in surprise. The clone's scent had matched the original's perfectly and from talking to him Kiba had thought him to be the real Naruto. Making a clone such a perfect match was no small accomplishment. Naruto had really come a long way in less than a year.

"I need to train harder."

Having spoken to his new, if temporary team, Kakashi, and Kiba Naruto thought he was done talking with people.

That was when he spotted Sakura waiting for him patiently outside his home.

"Sakura-chan, what are you doing here?"

For some odd reason she felt a bit nervous. *What am I being nervous for? It's just Naruto.* "There was something I wanted to ask you but I didn't get the chance."

"Oh, well all right Sakura-chan. Do you want to come inside to talk?" He gave her a wide smile. "Except for Hinata-chan you'll be the first girl to see my new home."

The first except for Hinata. "Sure Naruto." Stepping inside she got a quick look around. "Wow, this is a lot better than your old apartment. It's really neat for a guy's place too."

Naruto looked a little embarrassed. "Well Hinata-chan is always over so I would never let it be messy."

"Right, you know Naruto the whole village is talking about the two of you."

"They are?" He said in surprise.

"Well of course they are. I mean you're dating the heiress of the Hyuga clan, how could people not notice? And it's such a romantic story, you risking your whole future just to be with her." She looked at him with a bit of concern. "Have you made any progress with the hiraishin?"

"The village knows about that?" He was relieved to see her shake her head.

"No, the story the village believes is that you went to dinner at the Hyuga mansion with the Hokage and Jiraiya and were somehow able to convince Hiashi to allow you two to date."

"Then how do you know what really happened?"

Sakura smiled. "Tenten told me."

"Great," he muttered.

"The village *does* know all about how you convinced Tsunade to take on Hinata as an apprentice. Is it true you turned down the Shodai's necklace for Hinata's sake?"

Naruto nodded. "It sure is. I owed Hinata-chan a birthday present and getting baachan to teach her seemed like a good one."

Sakura looked at him in mild wonder. "Naruto, just *when* did you become so romantic?"

He looked at her in complete confusion. "Romantic? Me? Are you talking about me bringing Hinata-chan flowers on our first date? That's about as romantic as I've managed."

She shook her head. "Naruto, you faced down Hyuga Hiashi and offered to risk your freedom to be with the girl you care for. You gave up a necklace worth millions to instead do something for your girlfriend. Do you have any idea how romantic all that is? If Sasuke had ever..." She stopped. *Sasuke would never do anything like that. It would never even occur to him to make someone else his priority. All that matters to him is gaining power.* She knew that was true, but it was still very hard to give up on a dream.

Naruto felt a bit awkward in the sudden silence. "Ah, so Sakura-chan, what did you want to talk about?"

"Naruto, why... why didn't you choose me for your team?" She looked away. "Do you not like me any more?"

On impulse he reached out and took a hold of her hands. "Of course I still like you Sakura-chan! You are the very first girl I ever had feelings for and one of the first people to acknowledge me. To me Sakura-chan you will always be a friend and a very precious person!"

She looked back at those amazing blue eyes. She could see the warmth and the sincerity in them. *His hands are so warm.* Without realizing it she began to blush a little and her heart beat sped up. "Then... then why didn't you pick me Naruto-kun?"

He smiled, really trying to reassure her. "It's not because I don't like you Sakura-chan. It's just that I had to make the best team possible for my mission. We're chasing after a genjutsu expert who is very good at hiding. I picked Sasuke because with his sharingan he can see through genjutsu. I picked Tayuya because she is a genjutsu expert and should be a big help facing another genjutsu expert. And I picked Ino because with her abilities she's a natural at gathering information. I may need her mind jutsus to learn important information from witnesses or accomplices."

"I see," she said slowly. "Well I admit that makes sense." She didn't mention that she was learning genjutsu; Tayuya was teaching her and knew far more than she did. She gave Naruto a warm smile. "You know Naruto Ino was right, you really are starting to sound like a Chunin." She slowly pulled her hands out of his. "Thanks for explaining it to me, now I think I should get going."

"You don't have to leave right now Sakura-chan. It's been awhile since we've talked. Why don't you stay and we can just hang out?"

"I'd really like that Naruto-kun, but I do need to go." She quickly left.

Why was that so weird? Sakura wondered. As she walked away she looked back in the direction of Naruto's home. *Hinata is really lucky. Even if he is kind of dumb a t times Naruto really is a great boyfriend.*

Cha! Inner Sakura spoke up. ***And he could have been all ours! All you ever had to do was say yes to just one of his requests for a date. He would have so totally fallen in love with us.***

I know1 I know! But it's too late now. She thought sadly. She'd have laughed if only the joke wasn't on her. She finally realized that

Naruto was special to her only now that it was too late.

Team Naruto assembled at the gate where the Hokage made a point of seeing them off. "Remember, all of you, that Naruto is your captain and that you are to treat him as such." The Hokage turned to Naruto. "Remember Naruto, whatever the results I want you and your team back here within seven days. Understood?"

"I got it old man, I won't let you down." Naruto answered. He turned to his team. "All right lets go!"

In a tight orderly formation they left they village.

About a mile outside the village.

"Sasuke-kun, since we're going to a city on the ocean I brought my swim suit. Maybe we can go swimming together?"

"Hn."

"This isn't a vacation you idiot fan girl."

"Who are you calling an idiot?"

"Who do you think?"

As Naruto listened to the two girls begin to bicker he sighed. This was definitely going to be a challenge.

What they have in common

They had traveled for two days. Naruto had called a halt late on the evening of the second day so they could set up camp. They would arrive in Nagano early the next morning and get to work. With tents up and camp fire going Naruto had gobbled down his food and quickly excused himself.

As Ino slowly nibbled a rice ball she looked at the way Tayuya was wolfing down her food. "You eat like a boy."

Tayuya gave her an annoyed look. "Excuse me for being hungry."

Ino smiled. "It's all right; I actually admire your courage. It's really brave of you not to care about your figure."

Tayuya snarled. "A kunoichi cares more about being strong and healthy than about how she looks to a guy who couldn't care less anyway."

"Speaking of looks there's something I want to give you." Reaching into a pouch she pulled out an item. "This is called a hair brush. I doubt you've seen one before. You might want to try it on that mop you call a head of hair." Ino tossed the brush over to her.

"Gee thanks, I have something for you too." She reached into her weapons pouch. "This is called a kunai, that's ku... nai. You have probably never seen one of these, it's a weapon used by ninja and not for dainty little pretty girls like you." With a flick of her wrist she sent it straight into the ground between Ino's feet. "You should try using it holding the sharp end."

Sasuke stood.

"Where are you going Sasuke-kun?" Ino asked anxiously.

"I never thought I'd say this, but I think I'd rather hang out with the dobe." With that he slouched away.

Ino looked angrily at Tayuya. "Great! You made him leave!"

"No need to thank me."

Sasuke found Naruto and four of his clones in a small clearing about a couple hundred yards away. They each had a different section of the file and were reading it.

"Well here's something I never thought I'd see. The dead last of the academy actually studying something."

All five Narutos looked up as Sasuke entered the clearing and sat down on a log, uninvited.

"What do you want teme?" The original asked him.

Sasuke shrugged. "I was just trying to get away from the girls."

Naruto nodded wearily. "Yeah."

"So since when are you an actual student? I can't remember even one class where you didn't end up falling asleep."

"Hey, I fell asleep because those lectures were boring and I never cared. And except for Iruka-sensei all my teachers were jerks who didn't deserve my attention anyway. When I actually *want* to learn something I don't have any trouble concentrating."

Sasuke smirked. "Yeah, right."

Naruto immediately felt annoyed and angry at Sasuke's simple dismissal of him. "Hey, I'm the guy who learned the kage bushin in just a few hours, the blades of wind in one night, and the Yondaime's rasengan in three months. Ebisu even said I was the best student he ever had."

"So what?" Sasuke said coolly. "He probably says that to all his students to make them feel good." Sasuke felt just a bit annoyed at Naruto's bragging, even if his list of accomplishments sounded pretty impressive. *What do I care? It's just Naruto.* "If I had Jiraiya and Ebisu teaching me I'd have learned even more."

"I didn't have anyone helping me with the kage bushin. Do you think you could learn it in just a few hours?"

"If you did it then I could, there's no way you could ever out match me."

Naruto scowled. "Because you're an Uchiha right?"

Sasuke nodded. "That's right, my heritage and my blood make me special."

"I don't believe that, it's what you do that counts not whose blood you have."

"If you believe that you really are a baka." Seeing Naruto about to explode Sasuke held up his hands. "Look, I didn't come here to argue with you. I was trying to get away from arguments for awhile." He nodded towards the file. "So what have you figured out so far?"

Though he still wanted to yell at the arrogant teme Naruto decided to instead answer his question. "Supai was a Chunin who specialized in genjutsu with no special talent in taijutsu or ninjutsu. He specialized in information gathering and was highly respected in his field. At the time of his defection he was being considered for the Jonin exam. He stands five foot ten, brown eyes, black hair, described as handsome with a warm smile. His personality is described as charming; from all accounts he had a real gift for getting people to like him. He was twenty five at the time he went rogue which would make him thirty three now. He has no surviving family, no close friends, and no known associates, a real loner. Despite his success as a spy he likes attention. And that's everything I know about our target."

Sasuke nodded. "Pretty thorough for someone we're never going to meet."

"Wrong teme, we're going to find this guy and bring him in."

"Naruto," Sasuke sounded exasperated. "Supai is probably long dead, or if he's not he's hiding in some hole in the wall a long way from here. Whoever's committing these crimes it's definitely not him."

"What makes you so sure about that?"

Sasuke shrugged. "Don't you think if it were still him one of the other teams would have noticed? I mean even the hunter nins have given up on finding him, what does that tell you?"

"That they gave up too easy," Naruto said firmly. "Going over the file it's obvious they figured it had to be someone else because they stopped finding his scent. But I talked to Kiba and he says it's possible to change your scent. That means he *is* the one behind all this and that we *will* catch him."

"And you base all that on a conversation with Kiba?"

"I base it on the fact that this guy was good at what he did and whoever has been doing all these other crimes has been good enough to get away with it without ever being spotted. Talent like that is hard to come by so I don't believe a copycat could have done all this. If it were a copycat he wouldn't have been as talented and would have gotten caught by now. That means it has to be the real Supai."

Sasuke smirked. "This is all just wishful thinking. The Hokage doesn't expect us to actually find anything. That's why he made such a big deal about the time limit. All this is, is a chance for you to get some experience leading a team."

"Whether he expects us to or not this is a real mission and I plan on succeeding."

Sasuke stood up. "Whatever, I'm going to try and get some sleep." He left the clearing, careful not to let Naruto see his smile.

Nagano was a large modern city on Fire country's eastern coast. Its wealth came from trade and the fishing industry. It was a large sprawling city with modern sky scrapers and a crowded sky line. At the very sight of it Ino's eyes lit up and thoughts of shopping malls and gourmet restaurants filled her head.

"First I want to go shopping!" Ino exclaimed. "Then I want to find some place that serves western style food. Then I want to go to the beach." She looked over at Sasuke and batted her eyelashes. "Do you want to join me Sasuke-kun?"

"Ino," Naruto said. "This isn't a get away, it's a mission."

Ino smiled back. "Oh I know that, but how long could it take?"

Several hours later.

Ino was tapping her foot angrily and glaring at her partner. "How long is this supposed to take?" She ground out. "Here we are in this beautiful city and we've spent the whole day interviewing people!"

Tayuya looked at her without the slightest sympathy. "This is the whole reason we're down here remember?"

"I thought we came here to investigate *one* crime. How were there so many? And more importantly why am I stuck interviewing witnesses with you instead of with Sasuke-kun?"

"I have no idea why there were so many crimes. As for that last part, I think Sasuke threatening to give Naruto a, 'thousand years of death with chidori' whatever the hell that is, had something to do with it."

"Hah! Sasuke-kun was obviously joking when he said he didn't want to be partnered with me. Only a total baka like Naruto would fail to see that. I know that deep down Sasuke-kun is just desperate to spend time alone with me."

Tayuya just looked at her for a second. "What color is the sky in your world?"

In a dingy little office in police head quarters Sasuke and five Narutos sat around a small table going over a pile of police reports.

Sasuke closed the file he was looking at and rubbed his weary. "It's now official. This is the worst mission ever."

All the Narutos grinned. "Even worse than chasing that damn cat?" The original said.

"We never had to spend six hours chasing Tora." He finished rubbing his eyes and looked at the blonde. "What the hell are we doing here Naruto?"

"We're doing our mission. We're investigating all the cases that might be connected to Supai."

Sasuke shook his head. "We were called down here to investigate *one* crime. Why are we going through all these police reports and why are the girls interviewing all the victims and witnesses?"

"Just because we were called in about one crime doesn't mean that others didn't take place. All these reports are crimes that might have involved genjutsu or even just henge. They were reported to the local police who didn't seem to want to call in help from the village." Naruto pulled out a particular file. "The only reason this one got sent to the Hokage was that the guy insisted on it."

Sasuke smirked. "Well, if you got conned out of five million ryu you would too."

"Yeah, but there have been a bunch of smaller crimes that fit Supai's profile." He looked at all the files in front of him and his clones.

"There have been twenty three crimes in the past ten weeks that fit the profile. The amounts stolen ranging from a few thousand ryo to a couple hundred thousand. All of the thefts were non violent with the victims being tricked into handing their money over to the thief. If we can find a connection between all these crimes maybe it will point the way to Supai."

"You really think we're going to find this guy don't you?"

"Yeah, I do."

That evening the team reassembled at a restaurant near police headquarters to have dinner and go over their findings.

"So what did you find out?" Naruto asked eagerly.

"That people don't like having their minds read." Ino announced.

"Huh?" Naruto replied.

Ino let out an annoyed sigh. "Since we weren't dealing with prisoners I had to get permission to use my jutsus to read people's memories. Most people didn't like that and only a few of them agreed."

"But you did get to read some of their minds right?" Naruto asked.

"What did you find out?"

"Not much," Ino admitted. "The images I saw of the con man were all different, even the voices."

"That wouldn't be surprising if we really are dealing with a genjutsu expert." Tayuya said.

Ino sent her an annoyed look but continued. "The circumstances were different too. One time the guy saw his wife telling him their son

had been arrested and that she needed money to pay his bail. Another time a man was convinced he was being haunted and paid off an exorcist. All the situations were different."

"Did the con man seem to know the victims pretty well?" Sasuke asked.

"He seemed to Sasuke-kun," Ino said.

"Do the victims have anything in common?" Naruto asked.

Ino looked embarrassed and her cheeks darkened. "Uh, no, not really."

"Are you sure?" Naruto asked.

"Uh, well..."

Sasuke looked at her. "Ino, if there's something tell us."

Looking very uncomfortable she glanced down and muttered something.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that." Naruto said.

Ino took a deep breath. "They all went to the same, ah place for, ah, entertainment."

"What sort of entertainment?" Sasuke asked.

"The ah, nudey kind."

"Oh," Naruto said matter of factly. "So they all went to the same strip club?" Three sets of eyes all locked in on him. "What?"

"Naruto," Ino said shocked. "Have you ever been in one of those places?"

"Sure, when I was traveling with ero-sennin."

Flashback

Four Narutos picked up an unconscious Jiraiya to begin hauling him back to their hotel. This was not the first time, it was not even the fifth or sixth. He had actually gotten pretty used to the sight of barely dressed women. So the fact he was surrounded by five women in nothing but lingerie and high heels had little effect on him.

"Thanks again for letting me take my sensei back to the hotel."

"No problem sweetie," a particularly busty blonde in fishnet answered. "Tell him to come back anytime. And you come back too when you're a little older."

"Uhm, o.k.," he answered politely as he hauled Jiraiya away.

The three of them were still staring at him. Ino in horror, Sasuke in mild admiration hidden beneath feigned disinterest, and Tayuya in amusement.

"So does Hinata know about this?" Ino asked.

"No," Naruto said. "Why? Do you think I should mention it to her?"

"No!" All three of them shouted at once.

Naruto shook his head. "Whatever, anyway thanks Ino. Now we have a lead, let's finish up with dinner so we can go investigate."

"Investigate? Naruto, you don't mean..."

Naruto simply nodded. "Let's go investigate the strip club."

Sasuke smirked. "You know dobe; this mission has actually gotten more interesting."

Tayuya grinned at him. "Now you do realize that this place has *female* strippers, right?"

A direct order

"No, no, no, I won't do it!" Ino shouted furiously.

"Ino," Naruto tried to answer but she gave him no chance to.

"I can't believe you would even ask me to do this! And I actually used to think you were a really nice guy."

"What are you talking about? I am a nice guy."

"No you're not! You're a pervert like that Jiraiya you follow everywhere!"

Naruto looked offended. "I'm no pervert like ero-sennin. What I'm asking you to do is for the sake of the mission!"

"That's a lie; you just want to see me in my underwear!" Ino looked at a laughing Tayuya. "What the hell do you think's so funny?"

"Oh I just think you should be happy that we finally found a ninja mission you're actually suited for."

"And why are you only asking me to do this? What about her?" Ino snapped glaring at Naruto.

"I think it would be less suspicious if it were just you. An hour after you go in Sasuke and I will go too. Tayuya will stay outside and act as our back up if we should need her."

"Well let her do this and I'll be the back up."

Naruto shook his head. "Ino you're better at gathering information, that's the reason I asked for you in the first place."

"I still don't care! There's nothing you could possibly say to me that would get me to do this!"

Sasuke looked at her with a small grin. "That's too bad, I would much rather look at you in there."

Ino looked at him and her face darkened a shade or two. "Really Sasuke-kun?" He gave a slight nod. "Well I guess it is for the mission, I'll do it."

Tayuya shook her head in disgust. She took out her purse and pulled out a hundred ryu note. "Here," she handed the note to Ino. "Buy yourself some shame."

Ino went in with no more complaints. An hour later Naruto and Sasuke were in an alley way across from the club.

"You know," Sasuke said. "Our I.D.s say we're thirteen."

"Don't worry about it," Naruto said. "As long as we look old enough and have the cover charge they won't bother to check."

Sasuke smirked at him. "Geez dobe, it sounds like you're an old hand at this."

Naruto just shrugged. "You travel with ero-sennin you learn a few things. Let's go ahead and get started."

They both performed the henge. When the smoke cleared the boys looked like older teenage versions of themselves. Sasuke was still dressed in the same style with a dark blue Uchiha jacket, dark shirt and light khaki pants. Naruto meanwhile completely altered his clothing. The familiar orange jumpsuit and treasured Chunin vest were gone. The older version of himself had on a black leather jacket, light blue button down shirt, and dark pants. Both of them still had on their hitai-ites.

That had been a deliberate decision on Naruto's part. A couple leaf nins going into a strip club was nothing out of the ordinary. Naruto

was also hoping that the sight of them might draw a nervous reaction from Supai or maybe an associate of his.

"Hey dobe, anyone ever tell you that you look a lot like the Yondaime?"

"I do? Thanks teme."

"Why do you still have your scars though?"

Naruto shrugged. "I don't know, I guess I just don't like hiding who I am even when I have a disguise."

The club looked dirty and somewhat seedy from the outside. The words, 'Pink Pony' were written above a pair of rusty nondescript metal doors. On either side was a placard reading, 'Girls, Girls, Girls.' Stepping inside they found an older somewhat plain woman standing by a cash register before another set of iron double doors.

She flashed them a weary smile. "Welcome to the Pink Pony. There is a hundred ryu cover and a one drink minimum. Table side dances are two hundred ryu each. We have private rooms in the back that are a thousand ryu for a half hour. That covers the room only; you must negotiate with the girl separately for *services*. We encourage you to tip the dancers on stage." She collected their money and nodded toward the door. "Enjoy yourselves."

Going through the second set of doors Naruto was assaulted by a familiar odor. It was a mix of cigar smoke, alcohol, and cheap perfume. Music thrummed down from some over head speakers, on a small stage a topless girl seemed to wrap herself around a pole as men cheered and held up folded notes. The lights were dim and the place was crowded with desperate middle aged men and the young girls who were here to make them happy. Most of the floor was taken up by small tables with simple wooden chairs. Huge padded sofas

lined the walls, on a couple of them smiling men leaned back while women ground against them.

"Nice place," Sasuke said dismissively as the two of them sat down at an open table.

"I've seen worse."

Sasuke glanced at him. "You know I really want to hear more about that trip with Jiraiya some time. I bet you're really enjoying all this huh?"

Naruto glanced about at all the people surrounding them. "Not really."

The truth was he really didn't enjoy being in places like this. Partially that was because he had Jiraiya as an example of what he did *not* want to become. Partially it was because he was still only thirteen and just not quite as fascinated with boobies and the female figure as he would be in just another year or two. But mostly it was because of the masks.

He knew all about putting on a mask to hide the truth. For Naruto the women in places like this were as fake as a piece of plastic. They smiled and laughed and pretended to care, while all the while thinking about how much money they could make. The men they talked to weren't really men to them; they were just purses with legs. Jiraiya had understood and had it explained things to him very clearly. Ero-sennin wasn't bothered by it since he was just interested in having fun and didn't mind paying for it. But to Naruto this phony affection seemed almost too ugly to bear.

Being in a place like this only reminded him just how much he missed being with Hinata-chan. In his eyes she was a hundred times more beautiful than any woman here. When she smiled at him it was because she liked him. When she listened to him it was because she cared. He knew her feelings for him were real.

That was why he loved her.

"Hey cutie want some company?" With that a teenage blonde dropped herself into Sasuke's lap. She had on nothing but a matching set of purple bra and panties. Ino was rather pleased to see a light blush darken the boy's features, even if her current form was as imaginary as his. "My name is Lola, what's yours?"

Sasuke looked about to make sure no one was close enough to over hear. "I guess you got over your shyness huh Ino?"

She frowned at him. "I've already made about a thousand ryu just in tips. I won't give any of these old guys any dances though, and you wouldn't believe what some of them have asked me to do!"

"So you didn't have any trouble getting in?" Naruto asked quietly.

Ino shook her head. "As soon as I said I wanted to try out they pointed me to the dressing room. The girls here are actually pretty nice. It's not as bad as I thought, even if some of the guys are pretty creepy."

Sasuke smirked. "Well, if you ever need a second job..."

"I'll pass, and by the way," she gently tipped his chin up a bit. "I'm up here." Ino was again pleased to see Sasuke a little uncomfortable.

"So Ino," Naruto asked. "Which one is the manager?"

She frowned and pointed to a big fat bald man in his sixties who was sitting by the bar. "That's him."

"Sasuke, take a quick look." Naruto said.

Nodding Sasuke shut his eyes. When he opened them they were red. He looked over at the bar and then quickly looked all around the club. He then shut his eyes again before anyone could notice them. "Sorry Naruto, no henges, no genjutsus, no one using chakra that I can see."

"Great," Naruto muttered. He'd actually been hoping that the manager might just be Supai in disguise. But if he wasn't using a henge that was out, the manager had to be at least six inches too tall. "I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. Ino have you noticed anything unusual about anyone else here?"

Ino snuggled a bit closer to Sasuke as she shook her head. "I've only talked to some of the other dancers, but none of them seem strange. I've only been here an hour though."

Naruto nodded, a bit depressed but nowhere near ready to give up. They had two more days to investigate before they would have to head back. Maybe they could still find the lead they needed. He looked out over the crowd trying to find something, anything, that might be suspicious. The men in the place were all focused on the girls. The girls who were not currently with someone all smiled when they saw his eyes pass over them.

Then he spotted one dancer standing near the stage. Their eyes met, just for a moment, and the look on her face was not a false and friendly. It was a look he'd seen many, many times before back in the village. The look was suddenly swallowed up by an over eager grin.

Naruto waved to her and pointed to an open seat. But the girl shook her head and quickly ducked towards a door near the stage.

"Ino, who is that?"

Ino turned away from Sasuke just in time to see who Naruto was pointing towards. "That's Kameko, she's a little bit older than most of the girls here, but she's really friendly. Everyone likes her."

"Ino I want you stay with her." Naruto stood up. "O.k. teme, it's time for us to go."

"Go? We just got here."

"Stay if you want then." Naruto quickly headed towards the exit.

Sasuke let out an actual sigh of regret as he pulled Ino off of him and followed after Naruto.

Outside the club's back entrance a woman in a simple black dress and large purse left quickly. She was about five foot ten with brown eyes and long black hair in a ponytail. Her face was pretty though not truly beautiful; her body was slim and lithe. A few seconds later the door opened again and a blonde girl in a purple dress came out as well.

"Kameko where are you going?"

The woman looked back, annoyed and hostile. "I told you Lola I feel sick, now stop following me." She only took a couple more steps when three figures jumped down from the roof tops. They all wore leaf hitai-ites so were obviously ninja. She recognized the two men from the club; there was a young red headed girl there as well. Along with Lola they had her surrounded.

"Excuse me, but I'd like to have a talk with you." The blonde ninja said. His tone was serious and his look anything but amused.

Kameko gave him a friendly shake of the head. "I'm sorry, but I'm feeling sick and am going home. If you come back tomorrow night I'll be happy to talk to you then."

"I'm afraid this can't wait."

"You know there are laws against stalking helpless women in this city."

"I'm not here to stalk you; I am here investigating crimes committed by a missing nin name Supai."

"So what does that have to do with me?"

"We think Supai has been using this club to scout out potential victims for his crimes. And since you're from Konoha I was wondering if there might be a connection."

"Konoha? The hidden village?" She laughed and again shook her head. "I've never been there."

"Yes you have," Naruto said flatly. "My name is Uzumaki Naruto, but you already know that don't you? I saw the ugly look you were giving me, it's a look I've seen a whole lot. You obviously recognize me, or at least you recognize these." He touched the scars on his cheeks.

She gave him a cold smile and tightened her grip on her purse. "You're mistaken."

"No I'm not," Naruto said. "I'm an expert on those looks, you were definitely in Konoha. You know something about Supai don't you? Are you working for him? Are you his partner?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"We'll see, the Hokage has given me the authority to place people under arrest in the pursuit of my mission. You're coming with us to police headquarters to be interrogated, either voluntarily or not, it's your choice."

"My choice," she said in a friendly voice. "Is not to go at all." And in a single swift motion she pulled out a handful of smoke pellets from her purse and threw them down to the street. In an instant the area was filled with smoke. When it cleared she was gone.

She was flying over the roof tops moving as fast as she possibly could. She had always known this day might come. But she'd never once thought the Kyuubi would be the one to find her. She had to get back to her apartment and get the money, then she would get tot eh docks and the get the hell out of Nagano. Then she would lay low for at least a year. *I got too arrogant; I'll leave Fire country for good this*

time. And I'll only run small cons from now on, no more taking stupid chances. She was thinking about where the best hiding place might be when a huge monster with bandages over its eyes landed right in front of her.

"What the hell!" She shouted and quickly dodged away in a different direction. She thought she could hear some kind of music in the distance.

Two other huge monsters appeared as well. She was fast enough to avoid them, but they began herding her in a particular direction.

"Give it up!" she heard from a hundred shouts. She landed on a roof top surrounded by clones. These looked much younger and were dressed in orange and in Chunin vests. She also spotted the other boy; he also looked a lot younger.

"Just give up! You can't hope to get away." The clones called out.

She carefully looked around, she was completely surrounded. "Well I guess you've got me, but I refuse to be taken alive." She tore open her dress to reveal explosive notes underneath. Before anyone could say anything more an explosion filled the night.

The original Naruto stared at the smoking hole that was all that was left. "I can't believe she killed herself."

Sasuke activated his sharingan. "Naruto you baka it's a genjutsu!" Looking out he spotted her trail and leapt away without bothering to say anything.

"Sasuke! Where are you going?" Naruto called out and went after him, but not quickly enough. He temporarily lost sight of him.

She knew she had little time, but there was no way she was leaving without the money. She crashed through her apartment's front door

and raced to her bedroom. She reached into what looked like a solid wall and pulled out a small leather case stuffed with over five million ryu. *Now* she could get the hell out.

"All right it's over now."

She turned around to see the dark haired boy standing at her bedroom door with a kunai in hand. She did not fail to note that his eyes were red.

"Oh my," she said. "The sharingan, you must be Uchiha Sasuke, the last survivor of your clan."

Sasuke nodded, so far as he was concerned he was the last member of his clan. "If you know who I am then you must know that genjutsus are worthless against me."

She nodded sadly and lifted her hands over her head. "I guess it's over then."

Sasuke was surprised at the meek surrender. He had managed to leave the others behind and was temporarily on his own. But he was sure that even if she did try to fight he could handle her. He carefully entered the bedroom, never noticing the trip wire that had been placed in the doorway a foot above the floor. Despite his Uchiha blood he still tripped and fell right in front of her.

As Kameko brought her fist down onto the back of his head she was glad to see that one of the many little traps she had set actually worked.

"Damn that teme," Naruto shouted as he and his clones raced along the roof tops. Beside him Tayuya was playing her flute and guiding her three Doki. "I'm the one who is supposed to do stupid things not him!"

Tayuya spotted something and pointed. When Naruto saw what it was he grimaced. "Aw fuck."

Tayuya looked over and nodded, she couldn't comment as she needed to continue playing her flute. *I like this guy.*

Tayuya, her Doki, Naruto, and his clones landed all along the edge of the roof surrounding their target.

In the center of the roof Kameko stood in the middle of the roof still wearing a now some what torn black dress. Along with the dress was a briefcase tied to her back and weapons pouches around her hips. And standing in front of her bound in ropes was Uchiha Sasuke. She held a knife to his throat and for added measure had placed several explosive notes on him beneath his ropes.

"Just so we're clear," Kameko called out. "Unlike last time these notes aren't an illusion. If you try anything at all I'll kill him. I'll kill the last Uchiha."

"Let's calm down," Naruto spoke carefully and waited. "You have to know there's no way I can let you go."

"Oh but I think you will," Kameko smiled. "After all, I'm just a thief. I'm sure capturing me isn't worth the life of your precious Uchiha."

"You're a ninja," Naruto called out. "You must know every ninja is prepared to die in the line of duty."

"Oh but this is very different. This isn't some faceless Genin we're talking about here. This is the last Uchiha, I kill him and the clan is gone forever. Now do you *really* think the Hokage will be happy if you take me out at that cost?"

"If I let you go you'll just kill him later."

She shook her head. "No I won't. You see, I want to live. And I damn well know that if I kill the little bastard they'll never ever let me go. So

here's what's going to happen. I'm going to leave with my hostage and you're not going to chase me. When I feel I'm safe I'll knock him out and let him go. Nice and simple."

Sasuke was conscious, his arms were tied to his chest and his legs were tied but his mouth was not gagged. "Dobe what the hell are you waiting for? Kill her."

"Shut up!" Kameko pressed the kunai harder and a small trickle of blood ran down his throat. "Don't think I won't kill you if I have to!"

"Teme shut up, no one is going to die here." Naruto said.

"Best listen to your friend." Kameko warned.

Sasuke frowned but said nothing else.

Naruto knew he needed just a little more time. "You're Supai aren't you? You had a sex change operation, and that's why the hunter nins couldn't find your scent anymore."

Kameko grinned. "Very good, I give you credit for figuring it out. You should really take pride in finding me; I suppose I'll have to have another operation." She laughed. "Tell me something; was it because of your own secret that you were able to guess mine? I mean you must be an expert in hiding what you really are so maybe that gave you a special insight into my situation."

Despite the circumstances both Sasuke and Tayuya looked at him in confusion.

Seeing the looks Kameko nodded. "They don't know do they? Not willing to trust your own comrades in arms?"

"I haven't broken the law," Naruto said carefully.

"That law doesn't apply to you," she laughed. "Or to me either."

"If you break the Sandaime's law in front of them I'll kill you," Naruto said quietly. "Even if I have to track you down myself. That's a promise."

Kameko could feel his killer intent and see the way he was looking at her. "You know what? I believe you."

From a rooftop located directly behind Kameko Ino at last arrived.

"Take her out right now," one of the clones told her. "Before she moves."

"But what if..."

"Ino," the clone cut her off sharply. "That's a direct order! Take her out now!"

"Right," she ran through the hand signs. " **Shintenshin no Jutsu.**" As the consciousness left her body the clone caught her before she could fall.

Naruto timed it perfectly, he saw Ino arrive and cast her jutsu. At the instant Kameko began to stiffen he forced chakra into his arms and legs to get to her in less than a second. He grabbed her wrist and yanked the kunai away from Sasuke's throat.

In the next instant it was all over as Kameko smiled at him. "Mind body transfer successful."

Naruto quickly cut Sasuke loose. "You o.k. teme?"

"I'm fine dobe." Sasuke answered sullenly.

With everyone safe and the bad guy, err, girl, uh, whatever caught he let out a sigh of relief. It was over.

Mission completed

Everything seemed to be well in hand. Supai / Kameko had captured and secured. Sasuke had been freed and the stolen money recovered. Really things had turned out about as well as they could have and better than even Naruto had expected. So he was a bit taken a back when a loud shout split the air.

"WHAT?!" Ino bellowed. "What do you mean we're heading back to the village now?"

Naruto took a couple steps back from the furious kunoichi. "I mean just that, we'll go back to the hotel to get our things while some of my clones keep an eye on the prisoner."

"But we only got here today! I haven't had a chance to go shopping or go to the beach yet."

"Ino, the mission's not over until we get the prisoner back to the village."

"But we were supposed to be here for three days!"

Naruto shook his head. "That was just the max, now that we've got him, uh, her our work here is done."

Seeing that bullying wasn't working Ino tried to put on the charm. "Oh come on Naruto-kun couldn't we stay just one extra day? Pretty please?"

It was Sasuke that settled things. He turned to her and spoke waspishly. "Stop complaining Ino. The dobe is right; we should get out of here as soon as possible."

His sudden anger caught her off guard and she quickly nodded. Ino was not the only one surprised by Sasuke's reaction.

"You alright teme?" Naruto asked.

"Just fine, what are we waiting for." He leapt away heading back to their hotel.

Tayuya looked over at Ino. "You know I can see why you just can't resist his charming personality."

Naruto was determined not to take any chances on someone so skilled in stealth and escape. Kameko was constantly bound and kept under watch. He also pushed them as hard as he could so that after just one day they were almost two thirds of the way back. That evening everyone was exhausted and after eating they were all ready to get some sleep.

"I'll tell you what," he informed the team. "Why don't I just use my clones to keep watch on the prisoner all night? A few clones won't tire me out any and that way everyone can get a full night's sleep." The girls both thought that a fine idea.

"Forget it dobe," Sasuke informed him coolly. "I'll take my regular watch."

"Huh? Why?"

"I don't need any favors from you." Sasuke said flatly.

"It's no big deal, and I'm doing it for the rest of the team too."

"They might need your help but I don't."

"Fine," Naruto headed towards his tent. "It's not like you don't have enough other people doing things for you."

"What was that?" Sasuke said sharply.

"You heard me teme," Naruto said. "Take the first watch and wake me in two hours."

As the girls said their good nights and headed to their tents Sasuke activated the sharingan and went over to check on the prisoner. Kameko was tied to a large tree with no less than a dozen separate ropes. One of Naruto's clones had fed her and now she was simply standing there bound to the tree watching him as he checked the ropes.

"Still worried I'm going to escape?" Kameko asked.

"Every ninja is an escape artist, and I'm not taking any chances." Tugging and pulling on several of the knots he was satisfied.

"I heard your little spat, you know you shouldn't be upset when someone tries to do you a favor."

"I don't need favors, especially not from Naruto."

"Really?" Kameko smiled. "Because from what I've picked up you get a lot of favors. Not that I'm surprised, you being the last Uchiha I'm sure you've received a lot of special treatment." Kameko waited but Sasuke did not deny it. "So that being the case I'm guessing it's who's trying to do you a favor that sticks in your craw. So why is that?"

"Shut up, you don't know anything."

"Oh that's not true, I know quite a lot actually. In some ways I know more about him than you do." Kameko tilted her head and looked at him questioningly. "Tell me, how do you see him?"

"Why would you care about that?"

"Oh let's just call it vulgar curiosity shall we? I mean this is probably going to be my last night of going to sleep outside a prison cell. Won't you please indulge me? I really am very curious to know how you see him."

Sasuke's first instinct was to tell her to shut up and to threaten to gag her if she didn't. But a part of him was curious where this conversation might lead. "I call him dobe because that's what he is; we were in the same class in the academy. I was the student of the year while he was the dead last, and because of that we wound up on the same Genin squad." Sasuke shook his head. "He is loud, stupid, and has a bad habit of acting before thinking. He's also brave, hard working, and tough; he knows how to endure and keep going no matter what. He is also luckier than any ten people deserve to be."

"Oh?" Kameko chirped. "How so?"

"He is the Hokage's favorite. For some reason the Lord Hokage has always protected and watched out for him. He actually calls him, 'old man' to his face and gets away with it. He somehow convinced our academy sensei to graduate him even though he was the only one to fail the academy test. (Everything that happened with Mizuki is a secret at this point in time.) He also got special training from one of the top instructors in the village while preparing for the Chunin exams. Then during the finals the village was attacked by Orochimaru and his allies. Our sensei actually picked him over me to go into battle with."

Kameko heard the bitterness in his voice, but knew better than to laugh.

"So while I was wasting my time with guard duty he got to show off what he could do in real combat. He got promoted thanks to that. If my sensei had given me the same opportunity I'd have been promoted too. Now not only is he a Chunin but he's been apprenticed to one of the Sannin." Sasuke shook his head. "He's learning all these new jutsus and gaining new abilities while I have to waste my time with pointless missions."

"I see," Kameko said sympathetically. "It must be hard to be jealous of someone you think you're better than."

Sasuke's head snapped up and he sent the helpless woman a stunned look. "I'm not jealous of the dobe."

Kameko laughed and shook her head. "Of course you are! Have you actually listened to yourself? And who could blame you really? I mean here you are the last of a proud line being surpassed by the, 'dead last.'"

Sasuke bit down on an angry reply. In just a few words Kameko had perfectly described his sense of frustration at seeing Naruto slowly leaving him behind. *How did this happen? I'm an Uchiha; I'm supposed to be the best. So how does Naruto keep outshining me?*

"If it makes you feel any better," Kameko continued. "There is a reason why Naruto, like you, has received special treatment."

"What could you possibly know about Naruto and his treatment?"

Kameko laughed, but this time her laugh was tinged with bitterness. "What could I know about Uzumaki Naruto? In a way I know him better than you do, even if you've known him since academy days. You think the happy bumbling idiot you've described is the *real* Naruto?" Kameko shook her head. "That's only a mask to hide what's underneath. If you knew what your friend really was you wouldn't look down at him, you'd be afraid."

"Me afraid of the dobe?" Sasuke smirked. "There's no way that could ever happen." Even as he said those words a sudden image ran through his head. He was standing paralyzed in the Forest of Death as a massive gold snake was coming towards him. And then somehow the snake was brought to a halt just a few feet in front of him. There, miraculously, was a panting Naruto holding the monster back. Naruto had looked up at him, his eyes black slits and as red as the sharingan.

'You o.k. scaredy cat?' Naruto had said. Mocking him and reminding him of the time he's said those words to a frightened Naruto. Naruto had managed to surprise him prior to that, but that was the first time

he'd ever been amazed at his power. The first time he'd ever felt a little bit of fear.

There was a lot more to Naruto than met the eye. "When we were on the roof top you and Naruto were talking about some law. What was it exactly?"

"Sorry, but even if it's in a prison cell I want to keep living."

"Just what are you trying to hide?"

She smiled. "Me? My hiding days are all over now. It's your friend that has something to hide. Ask him if you're so curious, not that he'll tell you." She let out a long yawn. "Well this has been fun but I think I'll try and get some sleep."

The following morning things went without a hitch. With a couple of his clones carrying the prisoner the team made good time and would be back in the village before noon. As they leapt through the trees Naruto pulled up beside Sasuke.

"Hey teme, I talked to the girls and they agreed not to tell anyone about you getting captured. I won't put it in the mission report so you don't need to worry about it." Naruto flashed him a big smile.

Sasuke looked at him blankly. "Don't bother, put it in."

"What? Why would you want me to do that?"

"I don't want to owe you any favors Naruto."

Naruto had a slightly hurt expression. "Who cares? We're friends, and friends help each other right?"

Sasuke looked at him with his dark eyes. "Who ever said we were friends?" With that Sasuke pulled a short distance ahead of him.

The Hokage, Jiraiya, Kakashi, and Asuma had all gathered in his office.

"So the kid's already back huh?" Jiraiya said.

"Isn't he a couple days early?" Kakashi asked.

"He is," the Hokage answered.

"I'm a little surprised," Kakashi admitted. "Knowing Naruto I'd have expected him to investigate to the last possible moment."

"Maybe the kid figured out it was a wild goose chase and decided not to waste any more time." Jiraiya said.

"Actually it may not have been a complete waste," the Hokage said. "Apparently they have a prisoner."

"A prisoner?" Asuma said in surprise. "What sort of prisoner? Did they capture a copycat?"

"I do not know, but as Naruto and his team are bringing their charge here we should all be enlightened shortly."

A few minutes later the office door opened and Naruto and his team entered with their prisoner still tied up and in tow.

Jiraiya thought she was cute and immediately came over to give her a closer look. "Hey kid, who's the looker?"

Kameko smiled. "I'm an exotic dancer from Nagano, I go by Kameko now but I've had a whole bunch of names."

"Well I'm very pleased to meet such a beauty; I am the legendary toad sage Jiraiya."

"Well I am honored to meet the famed Sannin Jiraiya." She purred.

Smiling Jiraiya put a hand on her hip and leaned in closer to talk to her in whispers.

Ino slid up to Naruto, "Uh, aren't you going to say something?"

He grinned evilly. "Nope."

"So Naruto," Kakashi said while smiling beneath his mask. "Is there a reason you brought this woman here? Or is she just really good company?"

Naruto looked at the Hokage who was still sitting patiently behind his desk. "Uzumaki Naruto reporting mission completed Hokage-sama."

That immediately got the attention of all the men in the room, even Jiraiya.

"What do you mean Naruto?" The Hokage asked. "Your mission was to apprehend the missing nin Supai. Even if this woman is guilty of similar crimes that does not qualify as completion of your original mission."

Naruto glanced to where Jiraiya's hands were. "Ino has seen our prisoner's memories and can confirm with one hundred percent certainty that this person *is* the missing nin Supai... following a sex change operation."

"WHAT?!" Jiraiya leapt back and began rubbing his hands furiously on the front of his outfit. "Ew, ew, ew!"

"Am I not your type?" Kameko teased.

The men all had stunned looks on their faces. The Hokage's pipe actually fell out of his mouth.

"Naruto," the Hokage said slowly. "Please tell me *everything* that occurred on your mission."

Naruto did so, and since Sasuke had specifically asked him not to cover it up he also mentioned the hostage situation. Listening to everything the older ninja remained dumbfounded and silent except for the occasional question.

Kakashi shook his head. "You really never fail to surprise do you Naruto?" But even as he was complimenting his former student he was worrying about a current one. "As for you Sasuke, we'll be having a little chat later."

"Hn, whatever, can I go now?" With the Hokage's nod he turned and left.

"Oh Sasuke-kun wait for me!" Ino quickly followed after him.

Tayuya gave Naruto a quick grin. "Let me know if you ever need a genjutsu specialist again, it was fun working for you." Then she too left.

The Hokage just shook his head. "You did an absolutely amazing thing Naruto, I'm very proud of you."

Naruto had a huge smile on his face and began to rub the back of his head. "Thanks old man."

"You know Naruto," the Hokage said. "I was thinking about bringing you along slowly into the full responsibilities of a Chunin. But after this I think that would be a waste of your talent. I think I will begin giving you a great many more missions, and all of them at least B-rank."

"Really?" Naruto said excitedly. "That's great!"

"But not too many missions I hope," Jiraiya said as he was still rubbing his hands. "He is still going to need time to study."

The Hokage nodded. "We'll need to find the right mix." He smiled at the eager Chunin. "In any case Naruto you can expect to be kept

very busy from here on out."

Shortly after that Naruto was dismissed. Kakashi and Asuma offered to, 'escort' the prisoner to ANBU headquarters for interrogation. Jiraiya left to wash his hands in bleach.

The Hokage pressed the intercom button to speak to one of his secretaries.

"Yes Hokage-sama?" A female voice responded.

"Please have the head of the hunter nins report to me immediately, we need to discuss remedial training for the entire group."

Naruto was heading home feeling as though he were walking on clouds rather than on pavement. His very first mission in command had been a total success and the Hokage had promised to give him more difficult missions to help him build his reputation. Things were definitely looking up!

"Naruto!"

Naruto came to a halt at the sound of the familiar voice. He turned around to see the person approaching him. "What is it teme?"

Sasuke came up to him and looked him straight in the eye. "Fight me."

"What?"

"You heard me dobe, I want to fight you."

Naruto and Sasuke

Author's Note: The main part of the hunter nin section of this story was sent to me by soundless steps.

"You want me to fight you?" Naruto sounded dumbfounded.

"That's right," Sasuke insisted. "I've been wanting to fight you since the exams. So let's go and settle things between us." He'd expected Naruto to jump at the chance. But instead Sasuke watched as he slowly shook his head.

"I'd really love to beat the crap out of you teme." Naruto said. "But I can't fight you."

Sasuke smirked at him. "You afraid?"

Naruto actually grinned. "I wasn't afraid to attack Zabuza or Orochimaru; you think I'd ever be afraid of *you* ?"

"Then what's the problem?"

"The problem is it wouldn't be appropriate to fight someone of a lower rank, even in a spar. If I end up putting you in the hospital everyone will come down on me for fighting a Genin. And since it's you people would really be mad at me."

"Dobe there's no way in hell you could ever put me in the hospital. And since when do you care about being appropriate? You're the baka who painted the monument in broad daylight!"

"That was a long time ago and things have changed since then." Naruto insisted. "I'm going to be Hokage one day and everything I do is a test to see if I'm worthy of my dream. I can't just break the rules because I feel like it any more. I have to prove to everyone not just

that I'm a great ninja but that I can be trusted too. So I can't fight you, sorry." Naruto turned around and began walking away.

Sasuke clenched his fists as he began to get really angry. He truly had expected Naruto to jump at the chance to fight. The idea that Naruto was actually dismissing him was humiliating. "Don't turn your back on me! And don't use that stupid garbage about being Hokage as an excuse! You've been mouthing that stuff for as long as I've known you and I'm sick of hearing it. You're damn lucky to have made it this far and you should just be happy with what you've got. It's already more than you deserve."

Naruto came to an immediate halt and turned back around. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means you've only made it as far as you have through dumb luck and people just giving you special treatment."

" **You're** complaining that **I** got special treatment?!" There were no words to describe what he thought of Sasuke, of all people, saying something like that.

But Sasuke was actually nodding. "The Hokage has always protected you and let you get away with things that would land anyone else in serious trouble. Iruka passed you even though you failed the graduation test. Kakashi actually picked you over me to fight with." Sasuke made a face as though those words tasted too bitter to stand. "You somehow even got Jiraiya, a Sannin, to make you his apprentice. You've just had all this handed to you."

"HANDED TO ME?!" Naruto screamed at him. "Listen you damn baka teme I've never had **anything** handed to me in my whole miserable life! Everything I've managed to get I've worked and fought for! And if I've had a few people actually treat me decently it still doesn't make up for having most of the people in this village hate me! And I don't want to hear **you** complaining since the whole village has given you everything."

"I never asked for any of it!" Sasuke shot back.

"No, but you never turned it down either did you? You just went around with your nose in the air assuming you deserved it just because of your damn name." Naruto shook his head. "And you never even appreciated it."

"Appreciate what?!" Sasuke shouted. "The pity? The whispers? The burden of always being treated as different from everyone else? What the hell would you know about that?"

"Oh I know about being different from everyone else," Naruto said. "Only when they looked at me it wasn't with pity or concern. Don't ever compare your situation to mine teme. You were given everything that I always wanted!"

Sasuke sniffed. "Maybe that's just because I'm better than you are."

"You aren't better than me teme."

"Yes I am." Sasuke answered. "Whether you like it or not, blood tells. I've beaten you down every single time we've fought. I've always been superior to you and I always will be!"

"That's a damn lie!"

"You think so dobe? Then prove it!"

Naruto clenched his fists. He damn well knew the kind of trouble he'd be in with the old man if he kicked Sasuke's ass. He knew he shouldn't fight him; the whole village would condemn him if Sasuke were seriously hurt. But he also knew there was no way in hell he could let this go. "Fine, but no one can know about it. It's just between us."

Sasuke nodded, that was just fine with him. He didn't care what others thought, this fight was to settle his own inner doubts. "No

problem, I know the perfect place where we won't be disturbed. Follow me."

Every single one of Konoha's hunter ninja had been assembled minus their commander. They were taking animatedly amongst themselves, curious about the reason they had been called in with such haste.

Suddenly, the door opened making way for both their commander and none

other than the Hokage himself. Inuzuka Kawa knew what was coming and walked in a very controlled, almost stiff manner. Sarutobi was however, as relaxed as could be. They made sure to move to the front of the room where all could see.

The Hokage turned to the group with a calm demeanor and misleading smile. "How many of you would like to try tracking down Supai once more?" The room was still, not one person made a move to be a part of such a ridiculous mission. "I am guessing that no one wishes to volunteer because you all believe him to be dead?"

Despite years of carefully honed self control Kawa flinched a bit. Unfortunately for his fellow hunter nins but no one noticed, because they were all nodding.

The Hokage's expression suddenly changed into a frigid stare that froze everyone in place and halted the nods. There was no killer intent, just a disappointed look that caused even the most experienced ninja to worry. His voice was cool. "Supai is not dead; he is even now being interrogated by the ANBU prior to being sent to prison. He was delivered into our hands by a team of Genin led by Uzumaki Naruto. A new Chunin who has had no training as a hunter or tracker ninja. I am disappointed that none of you ever seriously considered the possibility that Supai might have changed his scent. He is now a woman using the alias of Kameko following a sex change operation."

Realization dawned upon the entire group that they had just been shown up by a newly minted Chunin and a group of raw Genin. Some of them wanted to comment on the 'demon' but knew better.

"I have half a mind to revert you all back to Genin status... but the other half has other ideas." The Hokage took a long puff on his pipe. "Given the abysmal performance in this case I believe some remedial training is called for. Each and every one of you will spend the coming week working on survival exercises."

Most of the hunter nins immediately let out a sigh of relief. Survival exercises were a regular part of their training anyway. A week of them would be a bit tiring, but not really too bad. Again none of them noticed the grim look on Inuzuka Kawa's face. He felt no relief; he knew what was still coming, or rather who.

"And to see that you are put through your paces properly I have selected the ideal instructor." The Hokage turned towards the door. "Please enter."

That was when a familiar figure in a trench coat and fishnet came in whistling a happy tune. As one the hunter nins in attendance let out a groan of despair. This actually got a huge laugh from Anko; she liked it when their spirits were already broken.

"All right you maggots!" She screamed at them. "I've got seven days to get you back into shape and I'm not wasting a minute! We're going on a twenty mile run right now, and kami help you if you don't keep up with me!"

Kawa looked pleadingly at the Hokage. "Do me and my men really deserve this?"

The Hokage nodded firmly. "I am afraid that you do, not for failing to bring in Supai, but for failing to pursue every possibility. The hunter nins must be dogged in their duty. Perhaps this will be an effective reminder."

Kawa bowed his head submissively and followed the rest of his men out to try and keep up with Anko's murderous pace.

Naruto looked about at the weird and twisted vegetation. He had hoped to never see it again. "Training ground 44 huh? You want us to have our fight in the middle of the forest of death?"

"That's right dobe, this place is only used for major exercises." Sasuke said. "No one will bother us."

They were in a small clearing standing about twenty yards apart. Each one eying the other carefully. Sasuke shut his eyes, when he opened them again they were red with two tomoe swimming in each.

"You ready for this dobe?" Sasuke asked eagerly.

In answer Naruto snapped into an odd fighting stance with his feet staggered and both arms held up at shoulder level. "Bring it on teme."

Despite the seriousness of their fight Sasuke grinned. "What's with the weird posture? You going to fight or dance?"

"This is the hermit style; I've been training in it in the last few months."

Sasuke shook his head. "Whatever dobe, it's not like it'll make any difference." With that he rushed straight in. He knew from plenty of past experience just how weak Naruto's taijutsu was. He was eager to beat him down with it if he could, rather than rely on ninjutsu which was Naruto's strength.

But as soon as he threw his first punch he received a rude awakening. Naruto moved with actual grace as his whole body seemed to just flow around Sasuke's jab. Effortlessly Naruto's left arm dropped down to easily block the punch aimed for his head. The

right grabbed a hold of Sasuke's shoulder and before he knew it he found himself on the ground.

Seeing Sasuke on the ground Naruto couldn't help but smile. It turned out all those murderous lessons with Fukasaku-sensei hadn't been wasted.

Sasuke jumped up to his feet eager for more. This time he tried a series of kicks. Naruto dodged or blocked them all easily. What began to worry Sasuke was that Naruto didn't seem to even be making a special effort, as though his attack was the easiest thing in the world. Sasuke also noted that the sharingan wasn't of much help. He could see what Naruto intended to do, but right now he was just reacting to the incoming attacks. That meant he was shown reactions to kicks and punches he had already thrown. Though he kept attacking he kept being the one on the ground.

"Still think you're better than me?" Naruto asked as Sasuke got up off the ground yet again.

"Don't get cocky, I haven't gotten serious yet."

"Fine then," Naruto ran through some hand signs. " **Kage Bushin no Jutsu.** " Fifty clones puffed into existence. "Let's get serious." The clones all seemed to disappear at once.

With his sharingan he could follow their movements, even going as fast as they were. Responding was a different matter. It was like his body was in slow motion. He could not block or move out of the way as a wave of clones came straight at him. Their fists slammed into him and he was sent flying. As he was hit he had a bitter memory of that showdown with Lee. What had Lee said then? *It doesn't matter what your eye can see if your body is too weak to respond.* As bad as that fight against Lee had been this was much worse, Lee hadn't made a bunch of shadow clones who were using forcing.

Even as he flew through the air clones who were behind him landed a combined kick that sent him rocketing straight upwards. He saw

Naruto in the air above him smiling like a madman and knew what was coming. Despite the pain from so many hits he was able to twist in mid air and dodge the kick aimed at finishing him. He ran through hand signs of his own and opened his mouth to spit out a huge stream of concentrated fire down into the clearing. He had the satisfaction of seeing and hearing the little, 'pops' of the clones being dispelled.

He even managed to come down safely on a tree branch. As the fire burned itself out he spotted the real Naruto also standing on a tree branch may be a hundred yards away. The encounter with all the clones had Sasuke already feeling like one huge bruise. Not only that but creating such a large fire jutsu had eaten up a serious chunk of his reserves. By comparison Naruto had that goofy grin on his face as though he were just having *fun*. Naruto didn't look winded or hurt in the least. What was more his sharingan was revealing he still had massive amounts of chakra swirling about him. And there was something about that chakra.

Sasuke shook his head to clear it. It really didn't matter if Naruto's chakra was weird. The important thing was that Naruto had a lot more of it than he did; he was also in better condition. Sasuke understood that the longer this fight dragged out the likelier it was that Naruto would win. He had no choice; he needed to end this in one big move. Holding out his palm there was a loud chirping of birds as he began to form a chidori with as much chakra as he possibly could.

Seeing this Naruto held out his own palm and created an orb of tightly concentrated chakra.

"I won't lose to you!" Sasuke shouted and leapt down to begin running at his target.

"I won't lose to you either!" Naruto jumped down and also ran straight towards his opponent.

They both poured all the power and speed they could into their attacks, covering the distance between them in just a few seconds.

"Naruto!" Sasuke screamed.

"Sasuke!" Naruto cried out as they slammed chidori and rasengan into one another.

Sasuke was lying in a hospital bed with bandages wrapped about his chest. He was in slight physical pain, but that was nothing compared to what his wounded pride felt. He'd lost. There was just no denying it. He'd lost to Naruto, the dead last, the failure, the joke, the outcast, *that* Naruto had beaten him. And beaten him decisively. *How? How did he get so powerful so quickly? It's been less than a year since we left the academy. How can there be such a gap between us?*

In his mind he replayed the battle over and over again. He tried to find some explanation for the result. Yet, no matter how many times he thought about it he came back to the same galling conclusion. Naruto was the stronger ninja.

The door to his hospital room opened and in strolled a familiar figure holding a clip board.

"My, my Sasuke, you've certainly been busy since this morning." Kakashi glanced down at the clip board he was holding. "Two fractured ribs, multiple contusions and bruises as well as some minor burns; you'll have to stay over night for observation. Since you seemed to be in perfect health when you were checking in at the tower I assume all this has occurred since then, care to explain how you got so hurt in such a short period of time?"

"I fell."

Kakashi waited but Sasuke offered nothing more. "You fell?"

"That's right."

"I see," Kakashi said. "Tell me, if I were to call Naruto in right now would he have fallen too?"

Sasuke shrugged. "How would I know? I haven't seen the dobe since I left the tower."

Kakashi let out a sigh and put the clip board onto a hook at the end of the bed. "I won't bother trying to get the truth out of you since I know how stubborn you can be. Besides I can guess what happened. If you want to pretend this was an accident that's fine, you're not the first shinobi to get hurt in a fight and cover it up. But know this Sasuke, your actions are noticed. You are becoming more and more reckless and that has people worried. There will be consequences."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Kakashi said grimly. "For right now just get some rest." With a hand sign he disappeared in a swirl of wind and leaves.

With a grunt he leaned back into his bed. He wished Kakashi would have just come out and told him what he meant. But he would worry about that later. Closing his eyes he replayed the end of their fight again.

Their attack had struck each other and set off a vast explosion. He'd been thrown back about fifty yards and slammed into a tree. He'd heard his ribs crack and tasted blood. He screamed in pain as he fell to the scorched earth. He'd poured everything into his attack and it wasn't enough. Despite his pain he looked up, he wanted to make sure Naruto was all right. Through the smoke he spotted him.

Naruto was still standing in the middle of the clearing where they had come together. Somehow the explosion that had sent Sasuke flying had not done the same to him. There was a lot of smoke, even with the sharingan he couldn't see more than the dobe's outline

standing there. But then there was a sudden breeze and enough smoke was blown away to give him a momentary view.

Naruto was standing there, but it wasn't the Naruto he'd known. This Naruto had red eyes and fangs, and was surrounded by red chakra that seemed to be in an animal's outline. There was even a single distinctive tail.

That was when his body finally failed him and he blacked out.

Lying there Sasuke was reminded of something Supai / Kameko had said. *'That's only a mask to hide what's underneath. If you knew what your friend really was you wouldn't look down at him, you'd be afraid.'*

Sasuke didn't know what secret Naruto was hiding, but it had to be the reason he'd become so powerful so quickly. "I have to know," he said quietly to himself. "I have to get that kind of power for myself."

Two talks with the Hokage

Naruto was not exactly shocked when he got the summons to meet with the Hokage less than an hour after his fight. He was also less than surprised when he entered the Hokage's office and saw the old man was upset.

"Sit down Naruto."

He had a sudden flashback to the time he had stolen one of the Hokage's robes and gone to the academy dressed in it. The old man had *not* been happy. Naruto dropped into the chair without a word.

The Hokage wasted no time getting to the point. "Uchiha Sasuke is in the hospital, he is not seriously hurt, but never the less the fact he is there is a concern. Do you know anything about this?"

Naruto considered lying, but quickly dismissed the idea. While a ninja was expected to lie and be a master of deception, lying to your superior was something else entirely. And lying to the Hokage's face was something else again. "We fought and he got hurt." Naruto answered simply. He was a little wounded to see the Hokage's look of disappointment.

"So you admit to being responsible for Sasuke's injuries?"

"I admit to giving him a fight he asked for and then beating the crap out of him."

The Hokage sighed and shook his head. Truthfully if it had been anything else he would have been amazed. "Naruto, you are a Chunin and therefore Sasuke's superior. It would not be considered proper for you to spar against him. But more importantly you know Sasuke's unique status within this village."

"Yeah," Naruto muttered. "The precious little Uchiha who everyone loves."

"Naruto, whatever you may think of Sasuke's special status it is never the less a very real issue. Had it become known you had seriously wounded him the entire village would be up in arms and I fear you would lose much of the good will you have earned since the invasion."

"I know that," Naruto answered quietly.

"Then why did you fight him?"

"Because he was being the same arrogant teme he's always been. He told me he was better than me and I had to show him he wasn't."

The Hokage shook his head. "Being goaded is no excuse Naruto. On a mission would you allow your enemy to anger you into a reckless charge just because he mocked you? Such behavior and lack of control might be understandable in an academy student, but you are a ninja now. Even more you are a Chunin; you must exercise more self control."

"I'm sorry."

"I do not want you to be sorry Naruto; I want you to learn from this. I have already explained to you that from here on everything is a test. I will be watching you, and so will others. If you truly wish to be Hokage then you must prove to me and to the village your worthiness every single day and with every single action. When Sasuke tried to get you to fight him that was a test, and you failed it." Naruto flinched a bit at the old man's harsh tone. "You knew it was against the rules but you valued your own pride more. Now tell me Naruto, what sort of Hokage would you be if your pride mattered to you more than doing what was right?"

"Not a very good one I guess."

The Hokage nodded. "There is nothing wrong in taking pride in who you are and in your accomplishments. But you must never allow your own pride to dictate your actions." As the Hokage spoke these words

he was thinking of Sasuke. That boy's pride and hatred were becoming serious issues.

"I understand," Naruto said. "So how much trouble am I in?"

The Hokage took a deep puff from his pipe and slowly exhaled it. "No trouble, Sasuke would not even admit he was in a fight, let alone against whom. If he does not wish to make an issue of it then I will not either."

"Sasuke didn't say anything?" As soon as he'd gotten the summons he'd assumed Sasuke had been screaming about him. It was nice to know the teme had kept his word and not told anyone.

"He did not, but I thought you and I should have this talk. What you did today will be a black mark against you. Too many such marks and you will never achieve your dream. Is that clear?"

"Very clear Hokage-sama."

On his way home again he heard a sweet voice shout his name.

"Naruto-kun!" He looked up to see a beautiful kunoichi running up to hug him.

Smiling he embraced her too. "Ah, now there's my girl!"

"You're back early!" Hinata said excitedly. "I wasn't expecting you for another two days."

"Yeah, we got done with it way ahead of schedule."

"So it was a success?"

"It sure was! The Hokage even told me he was so impressed with me that he was going to start giving me more missions." He decided to focus on the earlier meeting with the Hokage instead of the most recent one.

"That's wonderful Naruto-kun!" Hinata said happily. Even if it meant she would get to see him less she knew going on missions made him happier than just training. "Naruto-kun I'm headed to the Hospital right now for training. How about I come over tonight and make us dinner? I want to hear all about your mission."

"Will you make me your special ramen?" He asked eagerly.

She giggled. "Of course silly." She gave him another quick hug before setting off for the hospital.

He stood there and watched her go. Somehow just a few minutes with her was enough to completely lighten his mood. When she was gone from sight he headed back home and did not worry about black marks or anything else.

The following morning Sasuke was released from the hospital. He made his way to his apartment to shower and change. He then headed to the bridge to meet with his team. As usual Sakura was already there waiting, she was always the first to arrive.

Looking up at him she nodded politely. "Good morning Sasuke."

"Morning," he took his usual spot, leaning against the railing across from her. He looked at her. She looked at him. He waited for the expected deluge of questions. He was rather surprised when she just stood there and remained silent. After about ten minutes of this he was actually a bit curious.

"Aren't you going to ask me about my mission?" He inquired.

"I wasn't planning to," Sakura answered. "Usually when I ask you anything you just ignore me. I figured that if you wanted to tell me you probably would."

"I see."

There were another couple minutes of painful silence.

"So," Sakura spoke. "Do you want to tell me about your mission?"

"No, not really."

When Tayuya arrived Sakura suddenly livened up as she eagerly greeted her friend and asked about the mission. Tayuya was in a talkative mood and happy to share the details. Sasuke noted that she seemed *really* happy to talk about how he'd been captured by their target. He did not try and defend his own actions; he pointedly ignored everything being said.

Today Kakashi was actually a bit early, he arrived a little bit before one for their noon meeting.

"Good afternoon team," Kakashi greeted them with his usual good humor. "I have a C-rank mission for us today. It's a local one so it should only take us a few hours."

"Well that's fine," Sasuke said. "Maybe afterwards we can get a little training in. You can help us get ready for the Chunin exams next month in Mist."

"Ah, about the exams," Kakashi began to look a bit uncomfortable. "I have some news about them."

Sasuke immediately got a bad feeling. "What?"

Kakashi decided it was best to just get it out. "The Hokage has decided to remove our squad; we won't be participating in them."

10 Minutes Later

The intercom on his desk buzzed.

"Yes?" The Hokage answered.

A rather nervous female voice spoke. "Ah, Hokage-sama Uchiha Sasuke is here and he is, ah, rather adamant that he speak to you."

The Hokage sighed. He was disappointed with Sasuke's reaction, but hardly surprised. "Please send him in."

Sasuke entered obviously livid, he just leapt himself from slamming the office door. "Why," his voice was almost shouting. "Why am I not being allowed to take the exams?!"

"Sit down Sasuke." The Hokage said calmly.

"I don't want to sit!"

The Hokage allowed a small bit of anger leak out. "Sit... down."

Glaring at him Sasuke sat down in the chair in front of the Hokage's desk. "I want to know why I'm not being allowed to go to Mist for the exams."

"So far Sasuke I have only heard you mention yourself. Your teammates are also being denied the opportunity to advance in rank. Do you not have any concern for them?"

"This has nothing to do with them!" He answered hotly. "This is only being done to punish me! Is it because I fought Naruto? Are you upset that I took on your favorite?"

"Naruto has nothing to do with this. Regrettably you are correct in that this is about you and your own actions. I am afraid it was necessary to punish both your teammates as well." The Hokage hoped that Sasuke would at least give a moment's thought to how this would affect the other members of his team.

"Why am I being punished?" Sasuke demanded to know.

"The reason is simple Sasuke; I do not believe that you are ready to become a Chunin. As such I will not permit your participation."

"Not ready?!" He was on his feet. "I was ready six months ago and I've been busting my ass to get stronger since."

"There is much more to being Chunin than mere fighting ability Sasuke. Being Chunin means being responsible for the lives and safety of others. It means making your own desires secondary to the greater good of the mission and the team. Sadly, despite all of Kakashi's efforts you still do not seem to understand that. Your actions in challenging Naruto, your reckless behavior on the mission, and even your lack of concern for your current teammates all lead me to conclude that you are not ready to lead others."

"You cannot hold me back like this! I need to get stronger and becoming Chunin is a step in that direction."

"Tell me Sasuke," the Hokage asked calmly. "Why is that so important you?"

"You already know why. I need more power so I can kill Itachi!"

"So you still see yourself as an avenger rather than a ninja?"

Sasuke looked out angrily but refused to answer.

"Have you not heard a word I've said? Becoming a Chunin is a grave responsibility, not simply a stepping stone to greater power."

"Hokage-sama, with respect, you cannot deny me the chance to improve myself. If you do not reverse this decision I will go to the Council members and tell them what you've done."

The Hokage just looked at him for a moment. "It is not wise to try and threaten me Sasuke." He spoke quietly but with iron in his voice. "You are free to speak to the Council members, but I am the one who decides who is or who is not ready to face the exams. You may go now, you are dismissed." Sarutobi could see the boy's back stiffen at that. As he turned to go Sarutobi added one last thing. "Never do this again Sasuke. Even if you are a member of a great

clan a Genin has no right to simply demand to meet with me. From now on, if you wish to speak to me put in a request through your sensei as is proper."

"Hai, Hokage-sama," Sasuke spoke in an undertone just before leaving.

Though neither of them knew it, this was the last time they would ever speak to each other.

The very first

Iruka looked over and knew something was wrong. Though they did not get to have ramen together as often as they used to with Naruto the problem signs were not exactly hidden. His bowl was still full as Naruto just stared down glumly.

"What's the matter Naruto?"

Naruto looked over. "I'm a really bad boyfriend."

"Ah," Iruka understood immediately what was going on. "That's right, it's White day tomorrow."

In Fire country there were a pair of special holidays that were designed specifically for couples. These were Maiden's day and White day. Maiden's day was a unique day on the calendar in that it was the one day when it was considered, 'safe' for any girl to tell any boy she liked that she had feelings for him. And by tradition this involved the girl giving said boy chocolates. Girls did not only give chocolates to boyfriends or potential boyfriends. They could be given to fathers, brothers, or to any male friend. But the chocolates for friends and relatives were normally store bought. The ones for a boyfriend were always hand made by the girl and presented with fancy wrapping paper. Exactly one month later was the holiday known as White day where all the males having received chocolates were expected to give a, 'thank you' gift to the girl.

One Month Ago

Naruto was home when he heard the expected knock at his front door. Answering it he found Hinata standing there, right on time for their usual evening together.

"Hey Hinata-chan," he greeted her as he always did.

"Ah, Na... Naruto-kun, ah..." Hinata looked pale and sweaty and painfully nervous. Naruto noticed as she had not been this way around him since they'd started dating

"Is something wrong Hinata-chan?"

Gulping she suddenly brought out the package she'd been hiding behind her back. It was a box wrapped in orange and white wrapping paper with a red bow. "Please accept these!" She practically shouted. Her voice was so loud he actually took a step back.

Naruto eyed the present she was holding dumbly. He reached out and took it from her. "Uh, what is it?"

Hinata was suddenly blushing and pressing her index fingers together, something he hadn't seen her do in awhile. "They're cho... chocolates," she said nervously. "I made them for you. Today is Maiden's day so please accept them and enjoy them."

Naruto's face began to darken as well as he felt like a real idiot. "Today is Maiden's day? Oh I'm sorry Hinata-chan I sort of forgot. It's not one of my favorite days you know? No one ever gave me chocolates before, not even any cheap friendship chocolates."

Hinata's blush deepened and she looked down at her feet. "I... I'm so... sorry Naruto-kun, I always wa... wanted to give you some, but I was too af... afraid to."

Oh nice going! I made her feel bad! Since he seemed to be making a mess of things with his words he decided to try something else. He reached out and pulled her into a hug. "Please don't be sorry Hinata-chan," he said gently as he held her tight. "Maybe if I hadn't been such a baka that whole time you wouldn't have had to worry. Anyway, the past doesn't matter. I'm just so grateful that you went to the trouble of making these for me."

She looked at him in surprise. "Naruto-kun, you're my boyfriend! Of course I made you chocolates, and I will make them for you every Maiden's day from now on."

He gave her a big smile. "Thanks Hinata-chan, and I promise I'm going to get you something really special for White day as a thank you."

She shook her head. "You don't need to get me anything on White day. All I ask is, ah, if you don't mind, we eat the chocolates together."

He gave her a little squeeze before letting go. "Sure, since that means we'll always be a couple right?"

She nodded shyly. "That is the tradition Naruto-kun."

"Then let's have some chocolates!" He eagerly tore off the wrapping.

"Those were the best chocolates I've ever had in my life and it made me really, really happy to know Hinata made them just for me. She really deserves an awesome thank you gift." Naruto said miserably. "But even though it's been a whole month I can't think of a good enough present to show her how much I appreciate her making me those chocolates."

Iruka chuckled. "Naruto, I really do believe you're over thinking things. Whatever you get Hinata I guarantee you that she'll love it. All that matters is that the gift come from you."

"But I can't get her just anything." Naruto complained. "For her birthday last year I got Tsunade to take her on as an apprentice. I need to give her something just as great."

Iruka shook his head. "Naruto I hate to be the one to break this to you, but I don't think you'll be able to top that gift."

"I know," he sighed. "At least I have plenty of money to spend. With my share of Supai's bounty and all the B-ranks I've been getting I actually had to open a bank account. Otherwise Gamachan would have exploded. Maybe I could just buy her a whole lot of flowers or a dress or maybe even some jewelry."

"That's a bit much for a thank you gift don't you think?" Iruka pointed out. "Remember Naruto, Hinata comes from one of the richest clans in Konoha. She won't be lacking expensive things, and I'm sure that's not what she's hoping for from you anyway. Buy her a traditional White day gift like some hair pins, a picture frame, or some scented candles."

"That's not good enough though," Naruto insisted. "I want to give her something really special."

Ayame had been quietly listening in on the conversation and began to giggle. "Naruto I think I have the perfect solution for you. There's a gift you can give her that won't cost you anything and that I guarantee she will love and treasure."

"Really? Tell Ayame, please!"

"All right," she leaned over the counter and whispered into Naruto's ear. As she did so Naruto began to blush.

"I can't give her that." He said and looked embarrassed.

"Oh no? Well that's too bad because I guarantee Hinata would love it if you did."

Naruto began blushing very badly. "Do you really think so?" He asked in a small uncomfortable voice.

Ayame nodded. "I am one hundred percent sure."

The following day Hinata came over early and entered into Naruto's home. "There's something special you wanted to talk to me about?" Hinata asked.

Looking rather nervous Naruto nodded. "Yeah, uh Hinata-chan since it's White day I want to take you out tonight. You know to make up for me not having any plans for Maiden's day."

"You don't need to do that Naruto-kun, I am perfectly happy making us dinner and staying in."

"No way Hinata-chan, I am definitely taking you out. Uh, but before that," he began to rub the back of his head. "I want to give you your White day gift."

"All right," she said happily. If Naruto had already bought her something she would be happy to receive it whatever it was.

"Hinata-chan, could you close your eyes for just a second?"

"Close my eyes?"

"Yeah, uh, it's sort of a surprise what I'm giving you."

She thought it a bit silly but went ahead and closed them. "All right."

Naruto took a deep breath and acted quickly before he lost his nerve. He leaned forward and gave Hinata the very first kiss he'd ever given a girl. (Alas his very first kiss would always belong to Sasuke.)

At the sudden feel of warm pressure against her lips her eyes shot open. *He's kissing me! Naruto-kun is really kissing me!* Her face turned a deep red as her heart pounded as though it might burst from her chest.

Though it seemed to go on forever Naruto carefully drew back after only a few seconds. He opened his own eyes to look nervously at a reddened Hinata. "Happy White day Hinata-chan."

She immediately fainted.

When she came to she was lying on the sofa with Naruto sitting carefully next to her.

"Are you all right Hinata-chan?"

Not trusting her voice she just managed a slight nod.

Looking a bit embarrassed he rubbed the back of his head again.
"So, did you like your present?"

Hearing that she gave him a slow smile that seemed to fill his vision.
"Naruto-kun," she said softly. "You really do give the best gifts."

A dot or a circle

This short story is in response to hokage-hime who asked what would happen if in the end Naruto and Hinata could not be together.

Short Story

Many Years Later .

A small boy looked up as his mother headed towards the door holding a package. "Momma, why do you always make extra chocolates on Maiden's day?"

She stopped and gave her son a quick kiss. "My little Kiba-kun, they're just for an old friend of mine."

The boy looked at her a bit suspiciously. "Aren't you supposed to buy them if they are just for a friend?"

Hinata laughed a bit uncomfortably. Her son was getting to that age when he noticed things that she would have preferred he not. "Well he's a very special and dear friend to momma." She gave him another quick kiss. "I'll be back soon."

She knew there was no reason to feel guilty. It wasn't any sort of secret. Kiba knew, and he had never once told her to stop giving him chocolates. And in truth it was just as she'd told her son, she was just giving them to an old friend. There was nothing wrong with that. Nothing at all.

So why did she feel just a little guilty?

'The truth is I just can't let go,' she thought. 'Not completely, I guess even after all these years and everything that has happened to both of us some part of me still dreams about being with him.'

The Hokage mansion had its usual guard but she was passed through without a word. She was one of a small handful of people the Hokage trusted completely. Approaching the main doors she rang the door bell and tried to get her heartbeat under some sort of control.

The door opened. There standing in front of her was the smiling face of the Hokage's wife. Hinata could see the slight swell of her belly where she was carrying their second child.

"Hello Hinata-chan," Sakura greeted her warmly. "Naruto is inside meeting with Tsunade. Won't you come in?" Sakura knew of course, a woman could always tell. But she trusted her husband and Hinata to be honorable.

"Oh no, I have things to do." She shoved the small box of candy into Sakura's hands. "Please just give these to him and wish him a happy Maiden's day for me."

"Are you sure? He hasn't seen you in awhile and I'm sure..."

"I really can't!" Hinata turned and hurried away.

She loved her family, she really did. Kiba was a good man who had loved her faithfully and always been good to her. She loved her two children more than life itself and couldn't imagine not being with them.

Yet deep inside her heart there was an ache that she knew would never go away. She still loved him. And she knew that he still loved her. But sadly, in the world of adults, that was not always enough. But at least she could keep the promise she had made to him so many years ago. For as long as she lived she would give him chocolates on Maidens day.

She wiped away a couple tears and picked up her pace. She needed to get back to her family.

Main Story

Naruto and a number of clones were looking over the Hiraishin scroll as well as scrolls of the Substitution and Shun shin jutsus. The original had a triumphant smile. "I knew it!"

Hearing his loud shout Hinata came in from the kitchen where she was fixing them dinner. "Did you call me?"

Naruto looked up and eagerly waved her over. "Hinata-chan look at this!"

Curious she came over and knelt down beside him. She looked at the symbol he was pointing to. The symbol looked like a fishhook atop a flat line. "That's the symbol for, 'exchange' what about it?"

"Look at this one and this one!" He pointed to the same symbol on the other two, much smaller, scrolls. "See!"

"Uhm, Naruto, I just see the same symbol on all three scrolls." Hinata wondered if Naruto need to take a break from studying.

He smiled at her. "No they're not! They're *almost* the same. But look closely!" He held the shun shin scroll over a section of the Hiraishin so that the two symbols were right next to one another. "See the difference?"

"Uhm Naruto, the only difference is that the exchange symbol on the shunshin is followed by the symbol for air. While on the Hiraishin there's just a blank space. That's the whole reason why the Hiraishin is so difficult to master. It's an exchange jutsu that doesn't use anything for exchange."

"That's what I used to think too." Naruto said. "But then awhile ago I thought there was something different about this symbol. And I was right too!"

"You mean the empty space next to it?"

He shook his head. "No, look really close at the symbol on the Hiraishin."

She bent down to observe it carefully. "Naruto-kun, there's nothing different about it; it's just an exchange symbol."

"No it's not."

She smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "Naruto-kun dinner will be ready soon. Why don't you let the clones keep working while you take a break?"

He shook his head. "Look carefully, right here at the very end of the line at the bottom of the symbol."

She again bent down to look carefully. Finally she saw what he was so excited about. "You mean that smudge?"

"It's not a smudge," he pointed to another one of the symbols. "This one has it, so does this one and this one. My clones have gone through the *entire* scroll and *every* last exchange symbol has it."

"Naruto," Hinata said patiently. "Maybe the Yondaime was just a little sloppy writing."

"I thought about that Hinata-chan, but look," he pointed to other symbols on the Hiraishin scroll. "All these other symbols have flat lines but none of them have that little mark at the end. If it were a mistake or bad penmanship, wouldn't we see it all over?"

Hinata again looked carefully. "You know Naruto-kun I think you may be right. I do only see the smudge mark on that one symbol." She looked over at him with mounting interest.

"It's not a smudge; it's a dot, or maybe a circle." He said excitedly.

"So what does it mean?"

His smile faltered a bit and he began to rub the back of his head.
"Uh, I have no idea."

One Hour Later

An annoyed Jiraiya looked down at his apprentice. "You had me rush over for this?! I was in the middle of vital research for my next best seller!"

Naruto snorted unimpressed. "In other words you were peeping at the girls in the bath house."

"Semantics," an irritated Jiraiya snorted. "The point is you called me away from that important task to look at a bunch of smudges."

"They're not smudges!" Naruto insisted. "They're dots or circles; they definitely have some sort of meaning!"

Jiraiya rolled his eyes.

"Jiraiya-sama," Hinata said. "Please listen to him, I was skeptical at first too, but there really does seem to be something to this."

Jiraiya sighed and shook his head. "Naruto, can't you see what's going on here? Six months have already passed. You only have two and a half years left to win your bet. You're starting to feel the pressure and so you're inventing hidden symbols to try and give yourself hope."

"I'm not inventing anything! The dots or circles really are there!"

"Fine," Jiraiya crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at Naruto. "Then what do they mean?"

Naruto looked a bit embarrassed. "I haven't figured that out yet."

"Well let me know when you do. Now if you'll excuse me I have to get back to my research." Jiraiya performed a quick shun shin and

disappeared in a burst of wind and leaves.

Hinata sighed at all the leaves that were suddenly scattered across the living room floor. "I'll get the broom; honestly, he could have at least stepped outside first and not made such a mess."

Naruto reached down and picked up a single leaf. "Hey Hinata-chan, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, what is it Naruto-kun?"

"Why does the replacement jutsu require a log or something similar while the shun shin uses air and something else like leaves or sand?"

"Well it's because both jutsus allow you to move so quickly by replacing yourself with something else. The more complicated and efficient the jutsu the less mass you need, though you still need the same amount of volume."

He looked at her completely and totally confused. "Huh?"

Smiling she put the broom down and went back into the kitchen. "Here I'll demonstrate what I mean." She came back out with two identical glasses, one empty and one filled with water. She set them down on a table. "Here, both these glasses are the exact same size and so contain the same volume. Volume is really just another way to say the amount of space a thing takes up. Now one glass is filled with water and one is filled with air. They both take up the exact same amount of space so they both have the exact same amount of volume. Does that make sense?"

He slowly nodded. He didn't like admitting when he didn't know something. But Iruka and Hinata both had a way of explaining things to him that didn't make him feel like he was a dummy. "Yeah, I guess. But that doesn't explain why one needs a log and one just needs air and a few leaves."

"Well that's because the substitution jutsu is considered one of the most basic, which is why it is usually one of the first taught to Genin. Whereas the shun shin is much more difficult and has a far longer range. The difference is in the difficulty of locking onto something to exchange. The greater the, 'mass' the easier it is to lock on to the object and exchange yourself with it. The glass with the water has the exact same volume as the one with the air, but there's more *material* in water than there is in air. The denser the material, the greater the mass, the easier it is to exchange."

"Well," Naruto said. "I never thought of it that way, but you're right. Doing the shun shin is a lot harder than doing the replacement. Why don't we just use logs with the shun shin too?"

"Because there's trade off." Hinata explained. "When you use something with greater mass it's much easier to lock on to and perform the exchange. *But* moving so much mass requires more chakra and it also limits how far the jutsu can be used."

"It does?" Naruto sounded surprised.

"You never noticed how much more chakra the substitution uses?"

He gave her an embarrassed grin. "Uh, not really, I have a lot of chakra. I have to use quite a bit to notice."

She had an amused look as she continued. "Anyway, the less mass that gets exchanged the further you can travel with less chakra. You also are able to travel faster. What really made the Hiraishin so effective was that it could be used to move hundreds of times almost instantaneously. That's because it didn't use *anything* to exchange with. That's why on the scroll there's a blank space next to the exchange symbol. Theoretically it should be impossible to teleport without something to take your place. But somehow the Yondaime found a way to do it, no one else has ever figured out how though."

Naruto thought about it. When it came to book smarts he was no match for others like Hinata or Sakura. But sometimes he seemed to

make connections that left other, more intelligent people, dumbfounded. "What, what if that's not true?"

"What do you mean Naruto-kun?"

He knelt back down and looked at the symbol again. "What if there *is* an exchange being made? But he didn't want to put it down on the scroll to make it obvious. I mean this was considered the most powerful jutsu ever created in the village right? What if the Yondaime took a special precaution to hide what was used to make the Hiraishin work?"

Hinata thought about it and slowly nodded. "I think that might be possible Naruto-kun. I mean ninjas use codes and hidden messages all the time. It wouldn't be that strange if the Yondaime did something similar to protect the most powerful jutsu he'd ever created."

Naruto again looked excited. "This is definitely the key Hinata-chan! Once I figure out what the dot or circle means I'll definitely know how to work this jutsu!"

"That's wonderful Naruto-kun!"

His happiness was only momentary. "Uhm, though I still have no clue what it could stand for."

Hinata gave him a confident smile. "That's all right Naruto-kun, I'm sure you'll figure it out. Now help me sweep up the floor before we sit down to eat."

Far away in a hidden base in Grass country Pein and Konan bowed as a figure with a black robe with red clouds and an orange mask entered.

"What are your orders Madara-sama?" Pein asked respectfully.

Unlike the Tobi persona he looked to put on in front of others Uchiha Madara was all business when dealing with them. "I have decided to carry out operation New Blood. Reports would seem to indicate the time is right."

Pein frowned slightly. "Doing this will certainly damage his loyalty to the organization. That could be very dangerous given his abilities and his knowledge."

"I agree," Madara said. "That is why he must never find out. This operation must *not* appear to have anything to do with Akatsuki. If the operation's cover is in danger of being compromised you must abort the mission is that clear? Worst case scenario we can try again later."

"I understand, you wish the two of us to handle this alone?"

"That's right, is there a problem?"

"No," Pein said firmly. "I assume I am free to use whatever amount of force proves necessary?"

"Of course," Madara confirmed. "The amount of collateral damage is irrelevant, so long as the mission objective is achieved and secrecy is maintained."

Pein nodded. "In that case I see no difficulty at all."

Operation New Blood

Author Notes: Sorry that it has been awhile. As some of you may know I have been rather obsessed lately with another of my stories. I will try and update this one more regularly though, hopefully weekly. Also I want to clear something up about the previous chapter. The short story was meant to be an AU about what might have happened *if* Naruto and Hinata could not be together. I'm sorry if that wasn't made clear enough. It is *not* a look into this story's future.

Though of course that is not to say I guarantee the two of them do end up together in the end.

Kakashi had called a halt as soon as he'd spotted the special messenger bird. He was a little way from the rest of his team reading the coded message that had been attached. The other members of team Kakashi were watching curiously.

"Do they usually send out birds to teams returning from a mission?" Tayuya asked.

Sakura shook her head. "No, it's highly unusual. It must be something really important." Their team had been on the way home following a routine C-rank in Tea country. Sakura glanced at the other member of their squad. "What do you think it might be Sasuke?"

He looked at her and just snorted. "How would I know?"

Feeling a little embarrassed she looked away. *Why do I even bother?*

Tayuya glared at him. "Would it kill you to just be polite to her every once in awhile?"

"Hn."

"Brilliant come back," Tayuya brought her hands together and pretended to applaud.

Their inter play was interrupted by a grim looking Kakashi. "All right team we've just been tasked with an emergency A-rank mission. There has been some kind of terrorist attack at the complex on mount Kogane. We're the only team in the immediate area. There are more teams coming from the village but we'll be the first on the scene."

"Mount Kogane?" Sakura asked. "Isn't that where the gold mines are?"

Kakashi nodded. "Intelligent as always Sakura, those gold mines produce almost half of the gold mined in Fire country. They're an incredibly precious resource and we have to safeguard them whatever the cost."

Even moving at top speed it took them almost three hours to reach Kogane. What they found there was proof of a disaster. There had been a large refinery built at the base of the mountain. It was nothing but rubble now. Strewn all about the mountain side were the bodies of refinery workers and miners, all of them brutally cut down. Along with the corpses there was a full regiment of soldiers nervously guarding the perimeter of the mine entrance. They, and especially their captain, seemed relieved to see them.

"Thank Kami!" The captain said as soon as Kakashi and his squad approached.

"What is the situation?" Kakashi asked.

"A group of ninja just showed up here a few hours ago and began attacking the facility. The guards we had here were no match for them. After they slaughtered everyone they blew up the refinery and went into the mine shafts."

Kakashi shook his head. Ninja killed of course, he himself was a Black Ops legend, but they weren't supposed to just kill needlessly. If the enemy's mission had been to attack the facility and mines they could have done so without this pointless slaughter. "What can you tell me about the enemy? Their numbers, their affiliation, their abilities, anything would help at this point."

"I'm afraid we know very little. By the time I was alerted and got here with my men they were already in the mine shafts. I sent in a few squads to investigate, but they were immediately slaughtered." The captain grimaced a little. "They sent a message to us, they claim to not be affiliated with any village. "They call themselves the, 'hand of liberty' and claim they want to free Fire country of Konoha's influence. They are demanding that the Daimyo renounce all further use of Leaf ninjas and that the Hokage step down. What's more they gave a six hour time limit or they say they will blow up the mines."

Beneath his mask Kakashi grimaced. "I've never even heard of this hand of liberty. It may be nothing but a cover for an attack by one of the other villages." He sighed. "Then again they could be some sort of new group out to make a name for themselves, there's no way to tell. But either way they have to know there's no possibility their demands will be met, especially not in such a short time frame. How much time is left?"

"A little more than an hour."

"What can you tell me about them? Anything would help."

"There were only a handful of survivors, from what they say we can only confirm three enemies. At least one of whom can fly. We don't know what their abilities are."

"That's not much but we don't have a choice. Can you give me the plans for the mine shaft?"

"Right here," the captain handed a set of blue prints over. "The mine has eight separate levels with the richest veins at the bottom. If they

really do blow up the mines it's take at least eighteen months to reopen them. Fire country's economy would be badly damaged, maybe ruined."

"I understand."

Kakashi was with his team going over things. "This is about as bad as it gets," he told them. "We're facing an unknown and desperate enemy whom likely does not expect to survive this. Given their actions so far we have to assume they're ruthless and prepared to both kill and die. Normally I'd be very cautious, but unfortunately we don't have that option. We're obligated to try and stop them from destroying the mines."

As Kakashi spoke to his team he picked up their reactions and they were about what he'd expected. Sakura looked nervous. Tayuya looked grim but willing. Sasuke... Sasuke was grinning, no doubt imagining what this would do for his reputation. That wasn't good, but now wasn't the time to try and scold him.

"Along with facing an unknown enemy the location we'll be fighting in will also make this even more difficult. We'll be severely limited with the jutsus we can use."

"What do you mean sensei?" Sakura asked.

"To begin with, shunshin will be strictly limited to crossing distances we can see. We can't safely teleport through such thick walls." He looked at Tayuya. "The mine shafts are only six and a half feet high so I'm afraid you won't be able to summon your Doki."

"Great," Tayuya muttered.

Kakashi then turned to Sasuke. "No fire jutsus."

Sasuke frowned at him. "You're kidding, why not?"

"Because fire eats up oxygen and there'll be a very limited supply of it," Kakashi answered pleasantly. "If you use them we'll all end up suffocating."

"Any more good news?" Tayuya questioned.

"Only that we have to find and defeat the enemy, without letting them blow us up, inside of sixty minutes."

"Sounds like fun," Sasuke said with just a little eagerness.

At the entrance to the mine shaft they found the soldiers who had been sent in. It wasn't pretty. They also found a number of explosive notes planted on the walls and ceiling, all connected by wire.

"Hn, looks like they weren't kidding about blowing up the mines."

Kakashi nodded. "Sakura, I want you to stay here and start removing these notes."

"What?" Sakura asked. "But why?"

"If the mine entrance gets buried we'll be trapped and likely killed. We need to secure our route of escape. It's important."

"But why me?" She asked.

"Because you're the weak link on this team," Sasuke told her.

"Shut up!" Tayuya shouted him down.

"Enough!" Kakashi said angrily. "This isn't the time for this." He looked at Sakura. "Sakura I picked you because you're the most dependable member of this team, and I know you won't let me down."

Staying together and trying to be careful and quiet they searched each level. As they did so they found more explosive notes, but no sign of the mysterious enemy. They tore down as many notes as they could as they went, but there were too many and no time to get them all. They had searched the first seven levels and now had just ten minutes left before the deadline. There was a large elevator shaft that ran straight down through all eight levels. They chakra walked down the side shaft down to the last level.

"Welcome," a woman's voice greeted them.

Kakashi, Sasuke, and Tayuya, snapped into fighting stances. Across from them were three enemy nin. They were dressed in black with masks similar to Kakashi's covering their faces. One was clearly a woman who seemed to have wings rather like an angels. One was a rather bulky man. The other was a man with orange hair; he appeared to be their leader as he took a single step forward.

"I take it from your presence that our terms have been rejected and that Konoha has opted for a military solution."

Kakashi shook his head carefully. "You had to know there was never any possibility that either the Fire Lord or the Hokage would meet your demands. If you had actually believed that you wouldn't have set such a short deadline. Just who are you working for? What are you hoping to accomplish by all this?"

"Were I to tell you who are leader is you would not believe me. As to what we hope to accomplish, this is but a step towards the ultimate goal of making a new world, a world of peace."

"And how exactly does massacring a bunch of helpless workers fit into this, 'world of peace?'" Kakashi asked.

Their leader tilted his head slightly. "Sacrifices are necessary to achieve certain ends, as a ninja I do not need to explain that to you."

Kakashi was about to answer when he heard the sound of birds chirping behind him.

"Enough of this," Sasuke said. His eyes were red and the chidori was already fully formed in his palm. "Let's stop talking and just get to it." He raced forward straight towards their leader.

"Sasuke no!" Kakashi shouted too late.

Running at him with his sharingan active he could see the enemy leader was too stunned to even try and block or dodge. He was going to aim for the heart and then attack the man to his right. He was taken off guard when a huge energy field opened up around the ninja to his right. He was even more surprised when this chidori blinked out. In his momentary shock a fist caught him in the side of his face and sent him down. His body was suddenly wrapped tight in sheets of paper that seemed to come from the woman with them.

Their leader shook his head in obvious surprise. "All too easy," he looked at Kakashi. "You can die now." He made a hand sign and the notes in the floor, walls, and ceiling began to explode.

Sakura yelped as she heard the distant explosions and felt the floor begin to shake. She was trying to decide what to do when a panting and wounded Kakashi leapt out of the elevator shaft. He had an unconscious Tayuya slung over one shoulder.

There was no sign of Sasuke.

"Sakura run!" Kakashi screamed at her as more explosions could be heard and the floor began to shake even more violently. She did as she was told and ran with Kakashi out the mine entrance.

"Where is Sasuke?!" She shouted at him. She saw her sensei turn to her with a look that froze her heart.

"He's gone."

In a distant base a ninja with face piercings and long blonde hair opened a circle of light in the space in front of him. Three ninja jumped through holding an unconscious prisoner. The moment they were safe the incarnation of Pein ended the jutsu and dispelled his teleportation gate.

The bulky ninja carefully set down their prisoner.

"I see everything went according to plan." A ninja with an orange mask and a black robe with red clouds stepped forward.

Pein nodded. "Yes, operation New Blood was a success. Though I am still concerned of the ramifications should Itachi ever learn of it."

"Leave Itachi to me," Madara said. "Now that I have my new apprentice he no longer matters."

Welcome home

The captain honestly wondered if all ninja were insane. Of the ones who went into the mine only to blow themselves up he had no doubts. But he was wondering about the leaf nins who had survived. As soon as he and his men had felt the mountain begin to shake they had run for their lives. That might have seemed a bit cowardly but it had turned out to be the right decision. The entire area around the mine entrance had simply collapsed and sunk inwards. He and his men had been lucky. The three leaf nins who had made it out just as the ground was shaking? Well he thought they had to have received the personal blessings of kami. But the way they were behaving...

Kakashi stood there. It had been almost an hour and he was still numb. He had talked to the captain and had him send another messenger bird to Konoha with a special coded message he had written. His duty now was to get his team back to the village as fast as possible. Fortunately none of them had any serious injuries, nothing beyond cuts and bruises. Those among his team who had survived at least.

Please forgive me Obito, he thought. I failed my teammate yet again, and because of that your clan has died out. I truly am lower than trash. For the second time in his life he'd been forced to let a member of his team be buried alive. Rationally he knew there'd been nothing he could have done to save him. It was miracle enough that he'd gotten himself and the girls out alive. But in his heart he felt just as he had all those years ago when he'd saved Rin but lost Obito. *I was his leader ad his sensei, I should have saved him somehow. It's all my fault.* It had been an hour since the mine had been blown up and Kakashi knew that they should have been on their way back. But he felt too numb to do anything more than just stand there and grieve.

Tayuya had been pacing behind him the entire time. She was upset at what had happened, but her connection to Sasuke had not been strong, it was only natural that she had taken the loss better than they had. She was finally done waiting though and stalked up to him.

"Aren't you the sensei here?" She whispered harshly to him.
"Shouldn't you be helping her right now instead of just standing there like you really were a scarecrow?"

"You should leave her alone Tayuya," Kakashi replied wearily. "She's grieving in her own way."

Tayuya nodded, that was obvious enough. "I understand that she's grieving and you are too. But we're still ninja, and we're still on duty, aren't we supposed to grieve *after* the mission is complete?"

"That's true," he couldn't deny it.

"Then start acting like the team leader damn it!" Tayuya said angrily.
"I know I didn't get along with him, but I'm sorry he's gone, I am. But I've lost teammates before. Even if it hurts you can't just stop and forget everything else." She stomped past him and went over to Sakura.

Sakura's hands were bleeding and she was panting, clearly exhausted. But she pushed aside another boulder. She turned to begin pulling off some more rocks when Tayuya grabbed her by the arm and roughly began hauling her back to where Kakashi was.

"What are you doing?!" Sakura screamed at her. "I have to rescue Sasuke! He's trapped down there!"

Holding firm to one arm Tayuya reared back and slapped across the face with her other hand. "He's dead Sakura!" Tayuya screamed into her face. "Sasuke is dead! Accept it! He's dead and buried under a million tons of rock and there's nothing you can do about it!"

"Liar!!" Sakura screamed and tried desperately to yank herself free. "You probably just wish he was dead! I know how you hated him!"

"I never hated him," Tayuya kept dragging her back despite Sakura's desperate efforts. "I never liked him any, but I would never have wished this on him. Whether you like it or not Sakura the fact is he's gone now and there's nothing you can do about it. This mountain is his grave site."

"Don't say that!" Sakura wailed. "He can't be gone he can't, not Sasuke! Sasuke can't just be dead!"

"And why not?!" Tayuya demanded harshly. She knew she was being a bit hard, but honestly both Kakashi and Sakura were failing to behave like ninja. Even if your heart was being torn out of you a ninja was expected to complete the mission. "Was he a kami? Was he an immortal like out of the stories? He was a ninja just like you and me, and we both know that this is how it ends sometimes for ninja." Tayuya glared over at Kakashi. "Will you help me here *sensei*?"

Kakashi sighed and nodded. Despite his own feelings Tayuya was right. "Sakura, I'm sorry, but there is no way anyone could have survived that. Sasuke is gone."

Sasuke is gone. Somehow hearing Kakashi say those words brought it home to her. The boy she had loved for all these years was really gone. She was never going to see him again. Wordlessly she collapsed and dropped to her knees and began to weep.

Tayuya knelt down beside her and gently placed her friend's head on her shoulder as she put her arms around her. "It's all right Sakura, it's all right."

As his teammates mourned him Sasuke came awake in a cell more than a thousand miles away.

"Good, I see you're finally awake."

Sasuke sat up at the sound of the unfamiliar voice. He quickly realized that his wrists and ankles were chained. He was lying on a simple cot in a dark room with just a single lit candle. "Where am I and who are you?"

The man remained in the shadows where Sasuke could make out nothing more than his outline. "You are somewhere safe Sasuke. You needn't worry; you're quite safe I assure you. I am a friend and mean you no harm."

He held out his arms and let the chains rattle around. "If that's true then take these off me."

"I will in a bit, but first I want you to hear my offer."

"Whatever it is my answer's no," Sasuke told him.

"Just like that?" The other man sounded disappointed. "You don't even know what it is I'm offering you."

"I know you've kidnapped me and chained me up," Sasuke spat back.

"Yes a bit extreme I know, and I apologize to you for that. But I couldn't very well call you up and ask you to come in for an interview now could I?"

"Whatever it is you're hoping to get from me I'll never give it to you. I am an Uchiha and a ninja of the leaf."

"Oh, you're a ninja? In that case I'll just let you go. A ninja wouldn't be interested in what I have to offer. I am very sorry for the inconvenience, I was under the impression you were an avenger. Was I wrong?"

Sasuke stared hard into the shadows, wishing there was somehow he could see who this man was. "I am an avenger," he answered. "What of it?"

"I can give you what you want most. If you will join with me of your own free will I will give you great power and the chance to fight your brother."

"You'll help me find Itachi?" Sasuke couldn't keep a trace of eagerness out of his voice.

I have him. "I can do better than that. When you are ready I can arrange for the two of you to meet. You'll have your chance for revenge, but only if you serve me as my apprentice and agree to carry out my orders whatever they may be. If you will serve me I will give you the power you crave as well as your chance for revenge."

He would tell Sasuke a good bit of truth along with a great many lies. One thing he intended to keep well hidden was the *reason* for why Itachi had done what he had. He needed Sasuke to continue to despise and hate his older brother. He needed him to continue to believe his clan had been massacred solely due to Itachi's mad ambitions and need to test himself. *I will have to be very careful to keep Sasuke's survival an absolute secret until the time is right.*

"Just who are you?" Sasuke asked.

The man took a couple steps forward and came into the light. He had on a black robe with red clouds. That wasn't what made Sasuke gasp though. His eyes were red, he had the sharingan. "I am Uchiha Madara, but from this point on you will refer to me as master."

Sarutobi sat in his office staring down at the decoded message from Kakashi. *This is a tragic day; it truly seems we have come full circle.* On his desk was a letter with a simple message. It was five words:

Come home, all is forgiven.

The door to his office opened and Danzo entered. "You sent for me Lord Hokage?" Though they were old and bitter rivals Danzo gave the man the respect that he was due.

"I have just received news that Uchiha Sasuke is dead," Sarutobi said in a weary voice.

Danzo stiffened. "Is it certain? Could there be a mistake?"

"The message is from Kakashi, if there were any doubt at all he would have said so. No, I fear that Sasuke truly is dead."

Danzo carefully nodded. A ninja's life was never certain, the possibility that Sasuke might die on a mission had always been acknowledged.

And prepared for.

"Do you intend to activate the contingency plan?" Danzo asked.

Sarutobi looked at him. "Is there a choice?"

Danzo hesitated, but shook his head. "This will make things... difficult."

Sarutobi chuckled dryly. "I never knew you were capable of such understatement." He nodded to the message on his desk. "Send that out by black letter immediately."

Danzo glanced at the piece of paper. "Do you want it encoded first?"

"No, if it were to be intercepted no one would be able to guess its meaning."

Naruto and Hinata were just sitting down to dinner when there was a pounding on the front door. When Naruto answered it he was shocked to see Sakura standing there in tears.

"Sakura-chan? What's wrong?"

Wordlessly she threw herself onto his chest and began to cry. The moment they'd returned to the village she'd realized he was the one

she needed to see. More than Ino, or even her parents it was Naruto she needed right now.

Instinctively Naruto put his arms around her and tried to comfort her. "Sakura-chan, what, what happened?"

Sakura lifted her teary eyes to look into Naruto's. She saw the kindness and strength she needed there. "He's gone Naruto-kun, Sasuke is gone." She put her head back down and began to weep against his shoulder,

Naruto felt as though someone had just kicked him in the stomach. "No way, Sasuke? Sasuke can't be dead." Once before he'd thought Sasuke has died. On that mission to Wave he'd thought Sasuke had sacrificed himself for him. Since that time he had always known that any of them could die at any time. It was a fact every ninja understood, but that mission had driven it home for Naruto the way words in a classroom never could. But somehow he had just never thought Sasuke would ever die. He'd sort of imagined the teme would live forever.

Still holding tight to Sakura he suddenly realized he was crying.

Hinata stood there respectful and silent. She wanted to tell them both how sorry she was for the loss of their teammate and friend, but some how speaking now would seem like intruding. The two of them were holding each other and didn't seem to need or want anyone else.

They almost looked like a couple.

The state funeral for Uchiha Sasuke was a massive affair. Almost the entire village turned out to mourn him. Many of them could not help but be reminded of the funerals that had taken place not too long ago following the attack. In its own way this was an even more

melancholy affair. The tragic loss of a single life and the sad end of one of Konoha's greatest clans.

Two Weeks Later

An ANBU agent in mask and cloak arrived at the gate. He presented and ID and papers to the guards. Seeing they were valid he was permitted to enter the village. The ANBU made his way to the tower, moving at a good clip but not so fast as to draw any special notice.

Outside the Hokage's office he spoke to the secretary. "Can you please inform the Hokage that ANBU agent 66322 is reporting in as ordered?"

The secretary nodded as she called the Hokage on his private line. "He will see you," she informed him. "Please go right in."

"Thank you."

The Chunin thought nothing as the ANBU entered the Hokage's office and quietly shut the door behind him.

Sarutobi sat patiently behind his desk. He was slowly puffing on his pipe. "It has been a very long time hasn't it?"

"It has," the man agreed calmly.

"Please remove your mask."

"As you wish Hokage-sama." The ANBU removed the mask and stood there looking at his Hokage with a calm and unreadable expression.

Sarutobi slowly nodded. "Welcome home Uchiha Itachi."

The power of a lie

People often said that truth was powerful, and indeed it was. But sometimes a lie could have even greater power. That was what Sarutobi thought as he took his place at the head of the table. The meeting had already been in session when he arrived, a heated debate had come to a sudden and abrupt halt the second they saw him. He saw some of these men were genuinely angry. Given what they believed he could hardly blame them. *Even if I told them the truth would any of them believe me? More likely they would believe it to be nothing but a self serving fiction.* The real tragedy was that the lie was still needed. The truth would tear the village apart. Itachi had understood that and had not asked for Sarutobi to reveal what had really happened that night. He did not ask to be vindicated. For the sake of his clan's honor he would go to his grave as a traitor and murderer of his own blood kin. *How can I even pretend to have any sort of honor when I inflict such a thing upon him?* But he knew that doing what was best for the village sometimes meant sacrificing good men. Sadly this would be one of those times.

"I can guess what you were arguing about," Sarutobi said calmly as he lit his pipe. "Please feel free to tell me your honest opinion."

The Council members who had been shouting so vehemently only moments ago shared an embarrassed look. It wasn't that any of them were afraid to speak their minds, but it was rather that they all respected and admired the Third. It was not easy to criticize a man you revered.

Then again...

"Hokage-sama, with respect, have you lost your mind?" Nara Shikaku told him.

"You cannot speak to the Hokage so," Danzo said.

"Funny," Shikaku smirked. "It seems I just did."

"What my friend and teammate means," Inoichi said. "Is that you cannot expect us to accept this."

"Except for Orochimaru he was the greatest traitor this village has ever known," Inuzuka Tsume barked furiously. "He should be executed not welcomed back with open arms!"

"While I agree with all of you that this is distasteful," Hiashi spoke in that cool superior tone of his. "The fact remains he is now the last Uchiha. What the Hokage has done was necessary to preserve not only the Uchiha clan but the sharingan."

"You seem to forget that the only reason he is the last Uchiha is because he massacred all the rest of them." Shikaku reminded them.

"I have not forgotten," Hiashi said coolly. "But the fact remains he is the last. If this village intends to keep the power of the sharingan we must come to an accommodation."

"And what about justice?" Akimichi Choza spoke with passion. "Do we simply forget about all the murders and other crimes he has committed?"

"Certainly not," Koharu said primly. "He will not be allowed to leave the village and will be held to a strict parole..."

"Parole?!" Tsume said angrily. To the Inuzuka family and blood counted above all else. To them Itachi's crimes had been literally unforgivable. "That is sad joke. Is it true that he is to be given the Uchiha compound as well as the clan fortune?"

Koharu at least had the decency to look uncomfortable as she answered. "That is only proper as he is the only remaining member of his clan."

"Because he killed all the others!" Tsume declared.

The thought of Itachi living in comfort in the vast Uchiha compound sparked fresh argument. Sarutobi sat there and patiently listened, taking no active part in the lively debate. The lines seemed clearly drawn. Danzo, Koharu, Homura, and Hiashi supported his decision. Shikaku, Inoichi, Choza, and Tsume were firmly opposed. Aburame Shibi seemed to be neutral and alone took no hard stance on the subject. Sarutobi had hoped that some sort of consensus might be reached among the Council members. But the longer things dragged on the more obvious it became that no one was likely to change their minds.

Sarutobi coughed and got everyone's undivided attention. "I thank you all for your sincere input, however my decision stands. As is my right I have granted Uchiha Itachi a full pardon and recognized him as clan head. Nevertheless he will be placed on parole and denied certain privileges. He will not be permitted to leave the village. He will not be permitted to wear the hitai-ite or bear the title ninja. He will not be granted a seat upon this Council, though the Uchiha clan seat shall be kept available for a future candidate. This is my final decision on the matter as Hokage. Whatever your personal feelings I expect all of you to honor my choice."

Those who had argued against it all looked bitterly disappointed, but they nodded. This was their way, when a command was given by a superior it was to be obeyed. But Shikaku came to his feet and spoke what the other others were thinking.

"I will obey your command Hokage-sama, but you are in the wrong."

Uchiha Itachi waited calmly in a room in ANBU headquarters. There were guards on the door and he was not permitted to leave, but Sarutobi had made it clear he was not a prisoner. This was for his own protection. Until the Hokage could make it known not only that Itachi was back in the village but that he was now pardoned it would be best for him to remain hidden. Upon his return he'd had a long

talk with Sarutobi where he'd revealed all he knew about Akatsuki. They now had a full list of all the remaining members of Akatsuki and their abilities. Sarutobi had been shocked to learn of the existence of Uchiha Madara. It seemed unbelievable that the rival and contemporary of the Shodai Hokage could be alive and well and as powerful as Itachi described. He had been almost as interested to learn of Pein, the figurehead of the organization and secret ruler of Rain country.

All that was very useful and important information, but Itachi had not been able to tell the Hokage what he needed to know most. He had no idea what the future plans for Akatsuki were beyond a simple code phrase: Operation Legacy. Whatever it involved was a carefully guarded secret known only to Madara, Pein, and possibly Konan. Before leaving though he had done what he could to help his village deal with Akatsuki.

Itachi was looking at a newspaper. Every Wednesday he made certain to acquire a copy of the same paper. He would read it in private and then discard it. In the personals section there was a short message for Uzake Inoto. It read,

Come home, all is forgiven.

It was a black letter from his home village. And it contained a message he had never expected to receive. Though he understood why the message was being sent to him now. He carefully folded up the paper and prepared to throw it away.

"If you're done with it can I have it?" Kisame asked. "I want to read the comics."

Itachi handed the paper to him without comment. Kisame accepted it and eyed his partner with interest.

"Is it my imagination or do you seem a bit more sullen than usual? Has your little brother's death actually affected you?"

"Do not be ridiculous," Itachi replied calmly.

"I don't know," Kisame said. "It's hard to tell with you, but somehow I suspect there's just a little bit of sadness hidden behind that stoic front of yours." Disguised with henges they were calmly traveling through a small town somewhere in River country. "You know there's something I always wondered about, why did you spare him? You wiped out your entire clan including your parents. Why did you let your little brother live."

Itachi eyed him calmly. "If you truly wish to know I will tell you, but not here. When we are on the road."

They had a light lunch and picked up a few supplies and were soon alone traveling together.

"So let's hear it," Kisame said.

"Very well," Itachi spoke in a resigned voice. He shut his eyes momentarily, when he opened them again the mangekyo sharingan was active.

"Wha..." Kisame had no more time to react before he felt himself being drawn away. Everything seemed to disappear for an instant and then he found himself in a colorless realm beneath a full moon. "What is this?!"

"This place is the Tsukuyomi, the nightmare realm. Here I completely control time, space, and even all substance." He heard Itachi's calm voice come from every direction. "Please know Kisame that I take no pleasure in this. I have enjoyed our partnership, and even consider you a friend."

"Itachi, just what is going on here? Why the hell have you brought me to this place?"

"You wanted to know why I spared my brother. It was because he was the only one who was innocent of my clan's foul crime. The entire clan was on the verge of launching a coup attempt against my Hokage. For their own ambitions my clansmen would have plunged Konoha into a bloody civil war. To prevent this I was assigned the mission of exterminating the traitors."

"Wait a second! You're saying you killed your entire clan on orders?"

"That is correct."

"But if you were ordered to do it why did you go rogue?"

"The order was to kill the *entire* clan. It was the intention that I be the only remaining Uchiha. However I was certain my brother Sasuke knew nothing of the clan's treason. When the time came I found I could not kill him. So instead I convinced him I had gone mad and fled the village as a missing nin. Everything I have done since that time has been done for the sake of my little brother and my village. But now it is done. Sasuke is gone and I have been recalled to Konoha."

Kisame was looking in all directions nervously but there was nothing there. "You mean to betray Akatsuki?"

"I do not view it as a betrayal as I was never truly loyal. The entire time I acted as deep cover agent gathering information."

Kisame slowly nodded. Though he knew it was pointless he drew Samehada from his back. "You wouldn't be telling me all this if you were planning to let me live would you?"

"If I spared you, you would remain a dangerous enemy not only to me but to my fellow leaf nins. I am therefore obliged to deal with you now. I *am* sorry Kisame; I will make your death clean and quick."

"Gee appreciate that." Holding Samehada at the ready he kept glancing about.

Directly behind him a figure of Itachi instantly appeared holding a sword of his own.

In the real world only seconds after being attacked Kisame gasped and collapsed.

Itachi tranquilly approached him and knelt down to confirm he was dead. Satisfied he departed and began the long trip back to Konoha.

Sarutobi was not surprised when he heard loud shouts coming from outside the office door. He was even less surprised to see a certain silver haired ninja come bursting in. "That's all right," Sarutobi said calling off the Chunin who guarded his door. "I will speak to Kakashi." He glanced at the irate Jonin. "I can guess why you are here."

"Is it true?" Kakashi demanded.

"That Itachi has returned to the village and been granted a full pardon? Yes it is." Sarutobi remained seated and outwardly relaxed.

"How can you do this? This is a betrayal of the memory not only of Sasuke but of Obito and every Uchiha that Itachi murdered! This is unforgivable! I will not stand by and allow this to happen."

"You will," Sarutobi said with a voice heavy with authority. "I understand well how you must feel Kakashi, given your ties to both Obito and Sasuke. But it is not your decision to make, it is mine. And I expect you to obey my order like every other ninja in this village."

"I can't promise I will be able to do that," Kakashi replied.

"Please think of your remaining students before you take an action that will lead to either your death or your becoming a missing nin." Sarutobi told him. "He is the last Uchiha, for the sake of future clan members please do not recklessly."

Beneath his mask Kakashi frowned. "I understand the reasons for your decision Hokage-sama, but I believe you to be wrong."

Sarutobi sighed. "You are far from the only one to think that Kakashi. But whether right or wrong the responsibility is mine Kakashi not yours. You will not attack or seek revenge against Itachi in any way; I want your word Kakashi, right now. Or if you feel you cannot obey my orders then surrender your hitai-ite and leave this village."

Kakashi stared at him not believing it. "You would do that to protect him?"

"I would do that to make certain my orders are obeyed. If you are a leaf nin you must obey all my orders Kakashi, not only the ones you agree with."

Looking angry Kakashi gave his supreme leader a grudging nod. "You have my word, but I think you will come to regret this decision." Kakashi stormed out just as he had stormed in.

Seeing Kakashi's righteous fury only saddened him. There was nothing at all he could do about it; he was trapped by the lie. *I regret many of the decisions I have made. He sighed. But not this one.*

When the door to his room opened Itachi rose to his feet. "Greetings Hokage-sama, will I now be allowed to go?"

Sarutobi nodded. "Yes, though I will assign you an ANBU guard. I realize you likely do not need one but there is a great deal of anger at my decision and I think it best to be wary."

"As you wish Hokage-sama, if you feel my return will cause the village trouble..."

Sarutobi shook his head. "No, even if I am one of the very few who know it your return here is an act of justice. Even if no one else believes it, I am very glad to have you back Itachi."

Itachi had a bare grin touch his lips. "I am happy to be home Hokage-sama."

Lunch with a friend

She was walking through a field of flowers when on impulse she reached down and snatched one. She could remember a silly game she had played when she was little. A childish game that was supposed to tell you if the boy you liked also liked you. She brought the image of the boy she liked to mind and began to pluck the flower's petals. "He loves me... he loves me not..."

It had been six months since Sasuke's tragic death. When Naruto had first heard the news he'd literally been unable to imagine a world without the annoying teme in it. But the world kept spinning and life continued, even without Sasuke. In some way the last few months had actually been good. He'd gotten to lead several more B rank and two A rank missions. He was getting used to being the one in charge and was gaining valuable experience. He'd gotten to spend a lot more time with Hinata-chan and things between them were progressing nicely. Ero-sennin had taught him the rasengan and he'd mastered it. The pervy sage had been really amazed. Well, technically all he'd said was, 'not bad kid' but you could just tell he was really impressed. He was definitely getting a lot stronger.

But not everything was going well.

He was still certain he had the key to figuring out the Hiraishin no Jutsu. Unfortunately until he figured out what the dots represented he was no closer to solving it than he had been half a year ago. His sensei had been out of the village for the last month. He'd gone somewhere on a super secret mission from the Hokage.

One Month Ago

"But why can't I come with you?" Naruto whined.

"Sorry kid," Jiraiya had told him. "But this is a deep cover espionage mission and you just aren't stealthy enough."

Naruto eyed him for a moment with his spiky white hair and red and beige outfit. "And you are?"

"Don't let the outfit fool you kid, when I want to disappear I can."

Naruto had grumbled but nothing he said could compare with orders from the old man. "Well how long will you be away?"

Jiraiya had given an easy shrug. "Until I find something, there's no way to tell. It may be weeks or it may be months."

"MONTHS?!"

"Geez, calm down kid, I said maybe."

"But what am I supposed to do until then?" Naruto demanded.

"What do you mean? You train, go on missions, and work on the Hiraishin same as if I was here."

"But I won't have you here to help. How am I supposed to manage?"

"Now, now, kid don't get so panicked." Jiraiya gave him an easy smile. "The truth is you don't really need me that much anymore. I still have techniques to teach you but you're already one of the strongest ninja in the village. You've gone on plenty of missions without me and you already know I can't help you with the Hiraishin. That only leaves me helping you with training. Fukasaku will still be around and if you need more help just ask the old man I'm sure he'll find you someone until I can come back."

That had been it. Jiraiya had left and Naruto had not heard from him since. And he still had no idea when he might be back.

And that wasn't the only thing...

One Week Ago

"You're leaving too Hinata-chan?"

She came out of the kitchen with a steaming pot piled high with beef and vegetables. "I have to Naruto-kun. Tsunade-sensei is going to Nagamo to attend a major medical convention. They'll be discussing new medical procedures and newly discovered drugs. It's very important and as her apprentice she expects me to come with her."

"But... but..."

She set the pot down on the table and immediately came over to hug him. "It's a mission Naruto-kun; this is part of being ninja. You know how much I miss you when you leave on one of yours. I know you'll miss me but it'll be o.k."

He slowly nodded. She was right; this was part of being ninja. "How long will you be gone?"

"Three weeks."

Heading back from his morning workout with Fukasaku he was drenched in sweat and tired. At least the sadistic toad was willing to praise him a little; he had even been hinting that they might go somewhere special for, 'intensive' instruction. He shuddered a little at the thought of what Fukasaku would consider intensive if the morning workouts were ordinary. But he was also a little intrigued; the toad had said the training was what had made Jiraiya a sage. Jiraiya might be a super pervert but he was also a Sannin and the man who had singlehandedly killed Orochimaru. Anything that might put him on Jiraiya's level was definitely worth doing.

With his morning workout over his schedule was clear for the rest of the day. Except when the old man assigned him a mission Naruto was free to do as he pleased. He figured he would head home, do some chakra control exercises and study that stupid scroll again. He

was feeling just a little down with both the pervert and Hinata-chan out of the village. *Funny, I didn't realize how much I'd gotten used to having Hinata-chan with me all the time.* Before they had started spending so much time together it had been normal for him to be alone whenever he wasn't training or on a mission. He had learned to accept the loneliness as just a part of his every day existence. But now, he hated it. He missed Hinata so much! Just the sight of her or the sound of her giggles would have been enough to make him happy. *I'm going to ask the old man to assign me someone for training. That way I at least won't be alone all the time. Maybe Ebisu or Iruka are available.*

"Hey, Naruto-kun!"

A loud shout brought him out of his thoughts. He looked up to see a smiling face. "Hey! Sakura-chan, how are you?"

The pink haired girl in her familiar red outfit came up to him. She'd been deeply depressed following Sasuke's death and the two of them had hung out quite a bit. But once she seemed to be feeling better they had sort of naturally drifted apart again. "I'm just fine Naruto-kun; I'm going to the bridge. Kakashi-sensei scheduled a noon meeting."

Naruto rolled his eyes. "Which means he'll show up around two."

She laughed a little. "Yeah, probably."

He had always liked her laugh. It was nothing like the cute little giggles Hinata made. Sakura's laughter was always open and free, unlike Hinata's which was always sweet and private. He liked each girl's laughter.

"Tell me something Sakura-chan, why are you going to the bridge now when you know you're just going to end up waiting?"

"Force of habit I guess, and somehow I just now that the one time I don't show up there on time Kakashi probably will."

"Well anything's possible I guess."

She looked at him in his sweat drenched grey T shirt and black shorts. Since he'd begun his morning workouts his legs and arms had really become tone and well defined. Even all that perspiration failed to turn her off, it just seemed to make his tanned skin glisten. *Naruto-kun's really gotten kind of hot.* She thought. ***Hell yeah he has!*** Inner Sakura shouted her agreement. ***Come here to me darling!***

Naruto was suddenly looking at her with concern. "Are you o.k. Sakura-chan? Your face looks kind of red."

"Ah, it's nothing, just all this August heat." She quickly changed the subject. "So where are you headed Naruto-kun?"

He was about to say home when his stomach betrayed him and growled loudly, causing Sakura to start laughing.

"Wait! Let me guess, you're going to Ichiraku's right?"

Feeling embarrassed he rubbed the back of his head. "Yeah, I guess I am."

Buy him lunch! Inner Sakura cried out loudly.

What? Her regular self thought.

Buy him lunch! This is the perfect chance to spend a little time alone with him!

But... but he's with Hinata now. Wouldn't that be...

He's your friend right? Friends can buy each other lunch right?!

Well... I suppose that's true. There wouldn't be any harm in two friends having ramen together.

Right, totally innocent... heh, heh, heh. Inner Sakura rubbed her hands together.

"Hey Naruto, why don't I join you? In fact, it'll be my treat."

"Really?!" Even after everything he'd gone through just the thought of free ramen was enough to excite him.

She nodded decisively. "Yeah, just think of it as my way of trying to make up for all those times I turned you down when you offered."

"That would be great Sakura-chan!" He paused. "But what about your team meeting."

"Hey, I've got two hours, right?"

He nodded, his mouth already watering. Free ramen always tasted extra yummy. "Right Sakura-chan!"

When they got to Ichiraku's Naruto noticed that Ayame and her dad acted just a little weird when they saw him arrive with Sakura. Over the last few months when he came by it was almost always with either Iruka or Iruka and Hinata.

The two of them sat down at the counter and began to eat. Despite his ravenous hunger Naruto ate at a controlled pace instead of swilling it down in one big gulp.

Having endured many team meals together Sakura noticed the difference. *I guess being with Hinata really has changed him.*

"Naruto-kun?"

"Yeah Sakura-chan?"

"Tell me what's going on with you, I want to hear about your missions and about everything you're doing."

With the invitation he eagerly began telling her about everything he could. He told her about the missions he'd led and some of the lessons he'd learned about being the one in charge. He told her of mastering the rasengan and some of the other things ero-sennin had taught him. He told her about Fukasaku's hints and about the murderous morning workouts. He also told her about Hinata and what she was doing as well. He told her about everything except studying the Hiraishin.

Sakura sat there and found herself happy to just listen and take it all in. He was as excitable and eager as always and she was very glad that some things would never change. *I've missed him.* She realized. He was like sunlight; he brought warmth into her world and dispelled the darkness. Once she would have been upset by his rambling monologue. In the past she would probably have hit him just to quiet him down. But now all she wanted was to hear the sound of his voice and be near him.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" A girl's voice spoke and someone entered the small ramen stand. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Oh, hey Ino-chan," Naruto greeted her. "No you're not intruding; Sakura-chan was just treating me to some ramen."

The young blonde lifted a whisper thin eyebrow and glanced at her best friend. "Is that a fact?"

Sakura suddenly felt guilty and looked away as she answered. "I just thought we could get something to eat and talk a bit."

"And you even offered to pay, that's very nice of you." Ino looked at her. "I thought you had a meeting with your team today."

"I do, but Kakashi-sensei won't be there before two."

Ino looked pointedly at a clock on the wall. "Then shouldn't you be going?" The clock showed it was already a quarter to two.

"It's this late already?" She stood up and put some money on the counter. "I'm sorry Naruto-kun, I've got to go."

"That's all right Sakura-chan, let's do this again soon." Naruto gave her one of his huge smiles.

"Definitely Naruto-kun! Bye."

As she left Ino fell in beside her. "What the hell was that forehead?" She whispered.

"What?" Sakura said defensively. "I'm not allowed to have lunch with an old teammate?"

"Don't give me that, I saw how you were looking at him. And since when do you offer to buy someone else's boyfriend lunch?"

"It's not like that." She said sounding even more defensive.

"Uh, huh."

"It's not! It's perfectly innocent! I just wanted to have lunch with him because he's a friend."

Ino looked at her. "I hope that's true Sakura, because I wouldn't like to think you were the sort to go after Hinata's boyfriend. This isn't like how things used to be with Sasuke. Naruto has someone, he and Hinata are a couple and it looks like they're happy."

"I know that."

"Then you know it would be wrong to go after him, right?"

"Ri... right," she answered slowly. "It would be wrong."

"I'm glad you agree," Ino put a hand on her shoulder and offered a warm smile. "There are still plenty of guys out there for us. You'll find someone. A nice good looking guy... with a fetish for large foreheads."

"Shut it Ino pig!"

Laughing Ino took a side street and let her be.

"You made it!" Tayuya said as she arrived. "Amazing, you're an hour and fifty five minutes late but you're still here before Kakashi!"

"Yeah," she was just a little winded.

"So what kept you?" Tayuya asked.

"I was having lunch with someone and lost track of time."

Tayuya sent her a sly grin. "Did this someone happen to have blonde hair and three scars on each cheek?"

Sakura looked away feeling embarrassed again. "It wasn't like that."

"Like what?" Tayuya teased.

"It was just a nice lunch between two old friends. It wasn't like I was doing anything to try and come between him and Hinata."

"Why not?" Tayuya asked seriously. "If you don't do anything you're never going to end up with him."

Sakura suddenly looked at her in surprise. "What?"

"Look Sakura," Tayuya said. "It's kind of obvious you like him, I've seen the way you look at him some times. And I happen to like Naruto; I think the two of you might work. So I say go get him."

"I can't do that! He has a girlfriend!"

"You didn't seem to mind competition when it came to Sasuke."

She blanched a little at the reminder of her first love, but enough time had passed that the sound of his name no longer hurt. "That

was different, Sasuke never chose anyone."

"Is the boy married yet?"

"What?"

"Is he married?" Tayuya repeated with a roll of her eyes.

"Of course not!"

"Is he engaged?"

"Uh, no."

"Then go... get... him." She emphasized each word with a poke of her finger in Sakura's forehead.

"But Hinata..."

"Will definitely be hurt if he ends up choosing you over her. But wouldn't it hurt you to lose someone you care about without at least trying to get him? Love is war! And until he is married or at least engaged the battle is still there to be won." She laughed. "In the end it's his choice, and you may still lose. But wouldn't you rather fight and at least *know* it wasn't meant to be?"

"But..."

There was a swirl of wind and leaves and Kakashi materialized before them holding a book. "Sorry I'm late, there was this dyke that had sprung a leak and I was forced to stick my finger in it until help came."

"Liar!" Sakura shouted and tried to put thoughts of Naruto out of her mind.

Itachi arrived in the Hokage's office wearing dark blue civilian clothing. He had made it a point **not** to dress in anything that bore

the Uchiha fan symbol.

"Thank you for coming Itachi," Sarutobi said.

"Though I am no longer a ninja I remain at your service."

Sarutobi nodded. "About that, tell me something, would you be interested in performing a duty that would involve using some of your ninja skills?"

Itachi looked at him in mild surprise. "You mean to assign me a mission?"

"In a manner of speaking," Sarutobi grinned slightly. "How would like a temporary teaching assignment?"

Walking through the field the girl plucked the last petal. "He loves me not." She let the petal go and watched it drift away on the breeze. She stood there for just a second and seemed to be lost in thought.

Sakura then tossed aside the flower stem and picked another. "Two out of three," she began plucking. "He loves me..."

A new sensei

"What are we doing here old man?" Naruto asked curiously. Whenever he met with the Third it was almost always at his office in the Tower. Having the Hokage show up at his home late at night and then sneaking out together was definitely not the norm. Not to mention the Hokage's appearance. "And why are you dressed like that? I don't think I've ever seen you without your robes on." The old man was actually dressed like an old man. He had on an old grey tunic and pants while wearing a large straw hat and had even smudged a little bit of dirt on his face. When he'd knocked on his door Naruto hadn't recognized him until he'd spoken.

Sarutobi glanced at him and seemed rather amused. "I am not the only one who looks a bit different Naruto. It has been quite awhile since I have seen you not in orange."

"This wasn't my idea," Naruto grumbled. He was wearing an outfit similar to the Hokage's. To people walking past they would have surely seemed like a peasant grandfather and grandson. Sarutobi had even applied some dirt to his cheeks to cover up his scars. "If you wanted to be disguised why bother with the get up? Why not use a henge?"

"Henges are fine when you are among civilians or low level ninja, but elite ninja can sense them easily. My efforts tonight would be wasted were a random ANBU to notice us. It is very important that what we do tonight remain secret."

"And what is all this about? Have you lined up a super secret mission for me?"

"In a manner of speaking, though I doubt it is what you have in mind." Sarutobi answered. "I am going to introduce you to a man I trust very highly, he is a skilled and powerful ninja and he has agreed

to be your sensei until Jiraiya returns. I expect he can teach you a great deal."

"Really? That's great! But if you're just assigning me a teacher why are we doing all this?"

"You will understand once I introduce you to him. Everything about tonight is to be considered an S-rank secret. You are to reveal it to no one."

Naruto nodded, this was getting more and more interesting.

After a long walk through the village they came to a small tea house. Sarutobi approached the owner and spoke to him.

"My grandson and I would like some tea, and may we use the room all the way in the back?"

The owner immediately nodded and led them to a small room at the end of the hall. Inside there was a short wooden table surrounded by four simple chairs. "Some one will bring you your tea shortly." The owner slid back the paper door and left them.

"So we're meeting my new sensei here?"

"No," Sarutobi said. He carefully moved the chairs and then the table. He knelt down on the wooden floor and pointed to a knot in one of the floor boards. "Do you see this Naruto?"

"Yeah? What about it?"

"From now on when you are to meet with your sensei come here and ask for, 'the room all the way in the back.' You must use those exact words. No one will disturb you and when you are done with your training you will return here and simply leave."

"What are you talking about?"

The Hokage pressed down on the dark brown spot and Naruto heard a soft, 'click.' The trap door that had been beneath the table popped open. It had been concealed so perfectly within the lines of the floor boards that Naruto had not even suspected it was there.

"Come, let's go." The Hokage pushed the trap door all the way open to reveal a ladder beneath. He began climbing down. "Close the door behind you."

"No way! A secret passage way!" Naruto said excitedly.

The Hokage bobbed his head a bit, amused by Naruto's reaction. "This is a ninja village Naruto, there are secrets all around."

Beneath the tea house was a simple corridor made of brick with fluorescent paint that gave off an unnatural green light. From the layer of dust that coated the floor Naruto doubted anyone had been here in many years.

"Old man what is this about?" Naruto asked as they walked along the empty corridor. "Is all this really just to give me a new sensei? Why would *that* be an S-rank secret? And why would I have to go through so much trouble just to train?"

"I am going through all this for your benefit Naruto. You have already had a number of skilled teachers, each with his own particular area of expertise. Your new sensei has skills and abilities that are unmatched by any in this village. Training with him will greatly improve your abilities in a number of areas and add to your growing reputation." The Hokage let out a deep sigh. "Unfortunately to protect that reputation no one can know that he is your teacher, not even Jiraiya."

"Wait a second! You don't even want me to trust ero-sennin?"

"Not with **this**, he is your sensei and of course you should trust him. But I am afraid that some secrets must be kept even from him,

otherwise he might come to me with questions and accusations I prefer not to have to deal with."

"Yeah, pervy sage can get kind of jealous sometimes."

Sarutobi chuckled. "I don't think jealousy would be the issue Naruto."

At long last they came to another ladder. Sarutobi began to climb it and opened the trap door that was at the top of it. When Naruto emerged they seemed to be in a basement. There were wooden boxes and cloth sacks piled up all around them. Just like in the tunnel everything was coated in dust. The only light was coming from a guttering candle that was sitting on a rickety work bench.

Naruto looked all about. "So where is my new sensei?"

No sooner were the words spoke than a hand fell upon his shoulder. "I am right here Uzumaki Naruto."

"Yaaah!" he jumped into the air and turned about, a kunai clenched in his right hand. Standing there was a man his dark black hair and the most serene expression on his face. He was dressed in beige pants and a dark blue coat. Naruto stared at him. "How? How did you sneak up on me like that? I didn't sense you at all!"

"It is not difficult to hide oneself if you know the way. That is one of the many lessons I will teach you."

"Cool! Is it some kind of special ninjutsu or genjutsu?"

The man looked at him and slowly shook his head. "Not everything requires chakra; it is a simple technique that involves nothing more than patience and the ability to adapt to ones surroundings."

"You are being too modest," the Hokage spoke up. "The ability to hide and move in shadow in a technique taught to every member of the Black Ops, but no one ever mastered it to the degree you did Itachi."

Naruto suddenly froze and felt his blood go cold. "Itachi?" he stared at the stranger and suddenly thought he looked an awful lot like Sasuke.

Sarutobi looked at Naruto and nodded his head. "That's right Naruto, this is Uchiha Itachi. He will be your sensei until Jiraiya returns."

Two Days Earlier

"A sensei?" Itachi actually sounded surprised. "Would the village allow that considering I am no longer a ninja?"

"No, of course they wouldn't. The entire village would be up in arms. Therefore your activity will have to remain an S-rank secret." The Hokage paused. "That is if you should choose to accept of course."

"If you believe this will help the village then I accept."

"Don't you want to know who you'll be teaching first?"

"It makes no difference Hokage-sama, my only wish is to serve you and the village in whatever way I can."

"Very well then," He took a manila folder from his desk and handed it to Itachi. "You will only have one student; Uzumaki Naruto."

"Naruto?" Itachi again sounded surprised. "You wish to entrust the training of the Kyuubi's jinchuuriki to me? I can only imagine what the Council would say, never mind the village."

"Unfortunately given what they believe to be true I am certain they would move heaven and earth to prevent it. That is why secrecy is an absolute must. Fortunately I have posted strict orders that no one be allowed into the Uchiha compound, not even the ANBU who are assigned to watch it. So long as the two of you are careful you should be able to train there without drawing any notice."

Itachi considered it. "I agree, so long as we remain in the compound we should be secure, and we can use disguises as well." He looked at the Hokage carefully. "How long will I have him and how hard should I train him?"

"He is yours until Jiraiya returns from his mission. How long that will be even I cannot say. As for how hard to train him feel free to push him as far as you are able. It is vital he learn as much as he can from you as quickly as possible. Believe me; he will not object to hard training so long as he feels he is learning something valuable."

"Very well then, I will be Naruto's sensei."

They were in a small room sitting at a table. Naruto was glaring angrily at the two older men.

"I won't do it!" He said yet again. "No way in hell am I taking a murdering psycho traitor as my sensei!"

"Naruto..." The Hokage began only to be interrupted.

"What are you thinking old man? How can you even ask it?! What would Sasuke say?"

"Sasuke would object I am sure," Itachi said coolly. "But my little brother is dead; his wishes do not play into this."

Naruto looked at Itachi hatefully. "I'll bet you're glad he's dead aren't you? You got to come back here just like nothing ever happened. I'll bet you were dancing for joy when you heard the news."

Itachi stared back with his dark eyes and Naruto felt a chill pass over him. *Man this guy is scary!*

"Though I am sure you would not believe it I grieved for my brother's death, and I grieve for him still." Itachi said quietly.

"Like you grieve for your parents and the rest of the family you butchered?" Having been an orphan he had always dreamed of having a family. For Naruto Itachi's crimes seemed even more unforgivable than they did to most.

"Yes," Itachi answered calmly. "I grieve for my parents, for my best friend Shisui, and for the others I killed that night."

Naruto was surprised that he actually thought he was telling the truth. "Then... then why..."

"The reasons no longer matter; it is done and cannot be undone."

"Naruto," the Hokage spoke again. "I understand your concerns, and I am afraid I cannot really offer you any explanations. I can only tell you that we would not be here if I had any doubts at all about Itachi's character. I trust him, and I believe he can help you if you allow him to. It is your decision; I cannot force you to train with him. But if you did it might very well help you to achieve your ultimate goal."

Naruto frowned. He trusted the old man completely and up until now the Hokage had always shown good judgment. But how the hell was he supposed to trust Uchiha Itachi of all people? "What can he teach me that Ebisu or Kakashi or Iruka couldn't anyway?" Maybe he could convince the old man this was a bad idea. "I mean it's not like I have the sharingan, so what special training could he give me?"

"It is true that I cannot teach you any of the techniques that involve the sharingan, that goes without saying. I can teach you some fire jutsus and well as some useful genjutsu, but I believe where my aid might be most useful would be in another field."

"What do you mean?"

"Naruto," the Hokage said. "Uchiha Itachi is the finest assassin to have ever been part of the Black Ops. While it is true that Kakashi had a higher body count those deaths were mostly achieved in open

combat with the use of a chidori or raikiri. When a target had to be killed silently and swiftly no one was better than Itachi."

"You want me to learn assassination techniques?" Naruto said carefully.

"That's right, you will learn assassination and stealth techniques from someone who is a master of them." Sarutobi noticed the lack of enthusiasm. Normally Naruto was always excited at the prospect of learning any sort of new skill. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't mind killing," Naruto said. "When it's a fight between ninja we both know it may come down to that and we both take the chance. But assassination, murder, especially if the target is helpless..."

"Assassination is a fact of ninja life." Itachi said frostily. "It is as much a reality as normal combat or missions of theft or abduction. That is a lesson you should have been taught long ago." Itachi turned to the Hokage "Just what are they teaching in the academy these days?"

Sarutobi sighed. "Naruto, some times the best and cleanest way to deal with a problem is to simply remove it. That is a basic truth of the world we live in. It may not seem savory, and often it may not seem just, but is only one of a great many unpleasant truths to ninja life. I have already told you that you will be given a wide assortment of difficult missions in order to build up a formidable reputation. Do not doubt that some of these missions will include assassinations. Were you to study with Itachi your skills would vastly improve and you would become that much more valuable to me and to this village."

"Being a ninja often means we do things that we do not wish to." Itachi spoke in a low emotionless voice. "We do them because we must. Will you refuse a mission simply because you find it distasteful? If a murder helps your village will you let your village suffer rather than do what you prefer not to? To be a ninja is a hard thing. Do you prefer to leave this sort of work to others?"

Naruto shook his head slowly. "No... if this is something the village needs then I'll do my share." He looked to the Hokage. "I won't let you down old man; I will definitely be ready when the time comes."

"Does this mean you will accept Itachi as your new sensei?"

Naruto took a deep breath... and nodded. "Yeah, I guess it does."

Itachi nodded slightly in his turn. "Very well, I will do everything I can to turn you into a lethal and silent killer."

"Why does that not make me feel good?" Naruto muttered. "Well then, when do we start?"

Itachi looked at the Hokage, who gave the faintest of nods. "We will start right now."

"Now?"

"That's right," Itachi informed him and took something from a pouch. "I need to get a sense of just how skilled you are and where we will need to focus. So I am going to give you a test."

In his hand Itachi held a single bell.

"Aw crap," Naruto said.

Bell test

The Uchiha compound was two square miles and located in the northern part of Konoha near the commercial district. Once it had been a village within a village, a separate world unto itself. It was surrounded by a twelve foot high stone wall with only a single gate. Within the compound were not only homes but businesses of all sorts. The Uchiha had always liked to pretend that they were a clan made up solely of warriors. The fact was that only a tiny fraction of them were ninja. The vast majority were unable to activate the sharingan and lived as common tradesman or artisans. Within the compound were bakers, blacksmiths, tailors, doctors and representatives of nearly every profession. It was possible to live and work and hardly ever step outside the compound, and that was what many of the Uchiha chose to do. It led the clan to become more isolated from their fellow villagers and fed their own beliefs about their natural superiority.

When he became a ninja and began going on missions to foreign countries Itachi came to slowly realize that the walls weren't protecting the Uchiha clan. They were actually causing harm by fostering the notion that some how they were separate and distinct from the rest of Konoha. He recognized that different ideas and different points of view were a source of strength. Isolation and the inability to see things in more than one light, that was weakness. He had once suggested to his elders that the walls be torn down. His father and all the others had stared at him as though he were insane.

To the very end, they never understood. Itachi thought sadly. They never saw themselves as a part of something greater. Never really saw the village as anything more than a means to greater power. Perhaps alone among his clan he had come to truly love his village and to hold genuine devotion for his Hokage. And it was that love and devotion that ultimately led to the tragic events of the Uchiha massacre.

One day I will tear these walls down. I will teach my children to love the village and to take pride in serving Konoha and the Hokage.

Itachi led Naruto to a small park that was located directly behind the clan main house. As he did so Sarutobi leapt up to a second story porch from which he could observe what was going to happen. He was quite curious to see how Naruto would do. As Sarutobi watched the door to the porch slid open and a young woman with long dark hair stepped out onto the porch with him. She had a large belly.

The woman bowed politely to him, the peasant disguise was wasted on her. "Greetings Hokage-sama, you honor us again with your presence."

He turned and nodded politely to her. "Hello Mina, how are you?"

She smiled demurely. "Just fine Hokage-sama. Would you like some tea?"

He shook his head slightly. "No, but if it would not be too much bother could you make some ramen?"

"Ramen?" She said in surprise. "I don't believe you have ever asked for that before. But if you wish I will be happy to make it for you."

"It's not for me," he nodded towards the park.

Mina looked out and saw two figures conversing. One was obviously Itachi, the other...

"Is that Naruto?" She asked curiously.

"Yes that's Naruto; Itachi is to be his new sensei. Given your situation and the, well forced isolation, I was hoping that the two of you might become friends."

"That would be lovely," Mina said.

As they watched the two ninja leapt away from one another and there was a massive puff of smoke. When the smoke cleared two hundred kage bushins completely surrounded Itachi.

Sarutobi leaned forward a bit to get a better view as the test began.
This should be interesting.

Naruto had started to feel nervous as soon as the old man had split off and left him alone with Itachi. The fact Itachi was just leading him somewhere without saying anything was also a little unnerving. He led him to the middle of what looked like an old playground. There was a tiny pond, a few trees, and a whole lot of grass that had grown thigh high. At last Itachi came to an abrupt halt and faced him.

"This is where we will begin the test," Itachi informed him. "Here are the rules. The test will last one hour or until you have taken this bell from my belt or until I have rendered you unconscious. You are not limited to this park, you may go anywhere within the confines of the Uchiha compound *except* into that house." He pointed to the large two story home directly behind him. "You may not draw on the Kyuubi's chakra as that would alert the entire village to your presence here. Otherwise you are free to use any jutsus or tactics you desire. I would ask you to restrain yourself somewhat as I would like to limit the collateral damage."

Naruto smiled. "Fine, I should be able to take you down without too much trouble."

"By all means try, come at me with the intent to kill, or you will be easily defeated."

"Not a problem!" His hand flew to his weapons pouch and grabbed a kunai. In the same instant they both leapt into the air and back. Naruto fired his kunai aiming for Itachi's neck. He was not surprised to see Itachi dodge it easily. That first attack was just to let Itachi know he really would be going all out. *Come at me with the intent to kill. Yeah! Like I need any encouragement!* He ran through a series of

hand signs. " **Kage Bushin no Jutsu.**" *I'll show him just how strong I really am.* The entire clearing was momentarily filled with smoke. When it cleared he had bushins completely surrounding Itachi. "Hah! Now I've got you!"

As the first wave of clones closed in on him Itachi shook his head slightly and looked a bit disappointed. "You are not taking this seriously." With his sharingan already active he suddenly produced a sword. In one lightning fast motion he sliced through seven or eight clones, dispelling them with a rapid series of cheerful little, 'pops.' As his right hand gripped the sword the left fired off several shuriken that sliced through one clone after another.

Naruto got the clones' memories as they were rapidly being dispelled. What all the memories had in common was a sense of shock at just how *fast* Itachi was moving. Despite all the clones that were being thrown at him Itachi seemed to have no trouble at all keeping a couple steps ahead of them. None of them were even coming close to hitting him.

"Is this really the best that you can do Naruto?" Itachi called out.

"Fine then, let's try this." Naruto replied and gave a shout. "Forcing technique!" When Naruto created clones they automatically knew everything that he did at that moment. Thus he could give them mental instructions and orders without saying a word. But once created he had no further connection to them. He hadn't expected to need to use the forcing technique; he'd figured a couple hundred clones would do the job. So in order to share the change of plans he'd been forced to yell. Thus also alerting Itachi as well.

As one all the remaining clones suddenly moved as if a blur. One coming from behind reached out and *touched* the bell, but before he could grasp it Itachi had slipped away. "Much better!" Itachi declared as he was forced to dodge with all he was worth to avoid the now far faster clones. He fled the park and ran into the street. Naruto's clones were right behind him. The original gave eager chase as well.

"Pardon me," Sarutobi leapt away to follow the battle.

Mina smiled and headed towards the kitchen.

" Wind Style; Wall of Wind Technique." Using one of his wind jutsus he placed an obstacle in front of the fleeing Itachi and forced him down a side street. *Heh, heh, I've got him now!* The moment he'd gotten Itachi on the run he'd known he would win. Through a series of shouted orders and by creating additional clones who knew what he had in mind he'd used his clones like a pack of hounds chasing down its prey. He was slowly forcing Itachi towards the compound wall. Since one of the rules was that the test was limited to the area within the walls Itachi would not be able to escape without breaking the rules of the test.

Though his clones were too fast to get away from Itachi didn't make things easy. He ducked down side streets and over roof tops and continued to fire off shuriken, forcing Naruto to make more clones to replace the ones being dispelled. He noted the suspicious lack of jutsus on Itachi's part, but figured that was due to his concern of causing too much damage.

Itachi led him on a merry chase all the way through and around the compound. But finally, after making more than four hundred clones he had finally run him to ground. Itachi was standing with his back literally to the wall as the remainder of the clones closed slowly in. His original self stayed a safe distance with the clones between them.

"It's all over," Naruto called out triumphantly. "What do you think of my performance?"

Back to the wall with a sword in his hand Itachi looked over to the original and answered with a lecturing tone that somehow reminded him of Iruka. "I am disappointed; I had been led to believe that you had progressed much farther than this. I admit you have seemingly endless chakra and a certain degree of tactical skill, however you

are poorly organized and sadly lacking in perception. You concentrate too much on what you plan to do to the enemy without giving any thought to the enemy's intentions or abilities." Itachi shook his head in mild censure. "You failed to look underneath the underneath. It seems I have a great deal to teach you."

Naruto was very surprised that Itachi's evaluation actually *disappointed* him. He'd actually been expecting to hear praise. Naruto shook his head to try and clear that thought away. *Why the hell would I care what Uchiha Itachi thinks anyway?* "Whatever, how about we end this?"

"As you wish." Itachi disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Aw crap!" Before Naruto could move a fist slammed into the back of his head dropping him to the ground. He felt his hair being yanked back and the feel of metal against his throat.

Itachi spoke with a cold voice. "Your stupidity has just killed you."

Well at least he didn't tie me to a post. After being taken out so easily Naruto was feeling a bit humbled and looking for any positives. *There's free ramen, and that's always a good thing.* Following the test he, Itachi, and the old man had returned to the starting point and gone to the house that had been declared off limits. There Naruto had been surprised to meet a beautiful (and very pregnant) woman.

Itachi had turned to her to perform the introductions. "My dear, this is Uzumaki Naruto a Chunin and my new apprentice. Naruto, this is Uchiha Mina, my wife and future mother of my children."

Naruto stared at her and wasn't able to keep from blurting out the thought running through his head. "You're married to Itachi?!"

Despite the volume of his question she gave him a slight nod and answered easily. "That's right; I am Itachi-kun's wife."

Naruto turned to the other ninja and grinned up at him. "Itachi-kun?" Itachi reached out and poked two fingers into Naruto's forehead. "Ow!"

"You will refer to me as Itachi-sensei from this moment on." Itachi looked down at him with those cool unfeeling eyes. "You have a great deal of raw power Naruto, but as I have just demonstrated to you power without skill is nothing. Stealth and surprise are more lethal than any jutsu. Beginning tomorrow I will begin instructing you. I warn you know that it will be very difficult and trying, but I will make you a stronger ninja."

Naruto slowly nodded trying not to break eye contact. *Man, so scary.* "So long as I get stronger I'll work as hard as I can... Itachi-sensei."

Itachi nodded, satisfied for the time being. "Now then, my wife was kind enough to prepare a meal just for you. Please enjoy it while the Hokage and I speak of other matters."

He had built up quite an appetite and the smell of the ramen had his mouth watering. He headed for the kitchen while Sarutobi and Itachi went to a small study on the other side of the house.

"Tell me your honest opinion of him." Sarutobi asked as he lit a pipe. Before he could get the match to the pipe though Itachi leaned down and blew it out.

"My apologies Hokage-sama, but you cannot smoke here."

Surprised Sarutobi never the less put the pipe away. "I didn't realize you objected to smoking,"

Itachi looked a bit embarrassed. "Actually it's my wife who doesn't like it."

Sarutobi chuckled as he was reminded of his own dear wife, lost so long ago. "Well I shall honor her wishes. Now what do you think of

Naruto?"

"He's strong, brave, has the ability to improvise, and seems well aware of his own strengths. Unfortunately I can see where that might cause him to be reckless. He needs to work on his senses and learn to be more cautious when dealing with the unknown. His raw power will be enough to defeat most enemies. But if he is not very careful he will suffer defeat the first time he meets someone on a similar or higher level." Itachi was thinking of Pein and Madara.

"But you believe you can help him?"

"Certainly, I will definitely help him with his weaknesses and help him discover new strengths."

"I am very glad to hear that," Sarutobi paused and made his final decision. "Itachi, I am going to share a secret with you..."

Mina's story

Two Years Ago

Itachi watched as the steady rain washed the blood from his hands. *If only it could be that easy to wash away one's crimes.* He thought. He looked up into the dark sky as the rain continued to come down with no end in sight. If ever a land had been properly named it was Rain country. He'd heard his leader once say that it rained so often because the land was always crying. Certainly there had been reason enough for tears.

Just a few days ago the Leader had finally succeeded in killing Hanzo and his bodyguards. Hanzo had proved a formidable adversary, but in the end the Leader had been too strong for him. With Hanzo's death the long and bloody civil war was finally drawing to a close. But the killing wasn't coming to an end. With Hanzo's death the outcome was now certain and many people who had been on the wrong side were rushing to proclaim their allegiance to their new god and ruler. The Leader was willing to allow the majority of them to be spared. That was fortunate; otherwise the population of Rain would have dropped by half.

But that still left a few thousand poor souls who would not receive pardon. As soon as Hanzo was gone the leader had issued lists with about four thousand names. These were the condemned. Every last family member, friend, and staunch supporter of Hanzo's was marked for immediate liquidation. And not only them, all the families were to be wiped out as well.

The Leader had entrusted this work mostly to his fanatical Rain nins, but there were a lot of names to check off and he wanted it done quickly before many of them could escape. So he was he was using all his tools.

Kisame came out of the large house wiping down Samehada as he joined his partner out in the cool rain.

"What a waste," Kisame said with annoyance. "To have ninja of our skill killing a bunch of women and children." He shook his head. "It's like asking a master katana maker to forge some nails."

Itachi said nothing for a moment. "Why was this necessary? They were not ninja or soldiers. They were simple merchants, and not particularly wealthy ones at that. They could not have posed any sort of threat. Why was it necessary to slaughter them?"

"Who knows?" Kisame said dismissively. "One of them must have been buddies with Hanzo I guess." The blue skinned ninja smiled at his dour comrade. "Why do you care? Is it bringing back memories of the farewell you gave your own family?"

Itachi turned and gave Kisame a bloodless look. "Do not mention my family."

Kisame could feel Itachi's eyes burning through him. "Hey now, don't be that way. I was just joking."

He turned away again. "This is not a night for humor. I am done here." Itachi leapt away, heading in a direction opposite of where they were staying.

What the hell is wrong with him? Kisame stood there and just watched him go. Normally Itachi was the most emotionless and heartless person you would ever meet. It was damn rare for him to get in any sort of mood. *I wonder if this really did remind him of doing his own family.*

Am I such a coward that I need to run away? It is pointless; I cannot run away from my own memories. He would never admit it aloud, but what he had just done had indeed reminded him of that horrible night so long ago. Again he had killed women and children. Again he had

justified it by telling himself he had to carry out his orders. Whether he was acting as a member of Konoha's ANBU or as a spy maintaining his cover he had to obey his orders. He understood that. Yet he had felt the overpowering need to get away from that house and from all the blood. He needed to be alone, even for just a short time. He'd just picked a random direction and gone.

He had only gone a few miles when he noticed something. Passing a small farmhouse he'd spotted someone working in the field with a shovel. That was a bit suspicious, normally the peasants waited inside while it rained. It really was none of his concern, but it had caught his attention and he thought a little distraction might be what he was looking for. So he changed direction and headed onto the farm.

As soon as he was spotted the peasant planted the shovel into the earth and awaited him. As Itachi approached through the rain he saw that the peasant wasn't working the fields after all. In the grass were a total of six bodies, all of them in a line and covered by a blanket. The peasant was digging graves for them.

As he neared Itachi also noted that the peasant was a woman. She could not possibly have been older than seventeen or eighteen. She had a pretty face and a slim build and long dark black hair. She had on a pointed straw hat and the cheap grey home spun all peasants wore. By the way her dark eyes stared out at him it was clear she was expecting the worst. All the locals knew about the men who wore black robes with red clouds.

When he stood before her she immediately removed her straw hat and bowed low to him. "Greetings, ninja-sama. You have come to finish the work you began while I was away?" There was no emotion in her voice but a slight trace of weariness. She was someone who had given up all hope.

Itachi slowly shook his head. "I had nothing to do with this." *I was massacring a different family.* "What happened here?"

The girl stared at him blankly for a moment. "Ninja came," she said simply.

"And they killed your family?" Itachi asked quietly.

The girl nodded. "My father, my mother, my brothers, and my sisters," she said lifelessly. "All dead, all gone." She grabbed the shovel and began digging again. "If you do not mean to kill me ninja-sama, will you allow me to continue? I do not know how long I have and I want to bury my kin. That is all I can do for them now."

"Why were they killed," Itachi asked. "Do you know?"

The girl seemed to think about it. "Because of my grandfather I suppose. He served Hanzo-sama as a gardener for many years before he died. My father did not fight in the civil war and he did not allow my brothers to either. All we did was farm our land. My father never thought we would be killed for that."

Just as with the merchant family. They were not killed because they were a threat or had committed some sort of crime. This girl's family had been killed because the Leader wanted to make an example for everyone to see. He meant to show all of Rain country just how merciless he could really be to anyone who had supported his enemy in any way.

"Tell me, are there any more shovels?"

The girl looked up at him in surprise. "There are three more in the tool shed." She pointed to the small wood shed behind the house. "Why do you ask?"

She watched nervously as he ran through some hands signs and performed a jutsu. There was a puff of smoke and two exact copies of him appeared. One of the clones went to the shed to retrieve the shovels and hand them out.

"I will assist you," Itachi said calmly and the three began to dig.

The girl stopped completely and stared at him. "Why would you help me? My name is on one of those lists too, I'll be dead soon. Why would one of the Akatsuki help someone like me?"

"Because I wish to." Itachi said simply he and his two clones continued to stoically dig.

She watched him for a moment, and then slowly returned to digging herself. "My name is Tochi Mina by the way."

Itachi nodded. "I am Uchiha Itachi."

Her eyes widened, she'd heard of that name. He was supposedly one of the most ruthless and cold blooded of killers. She could not imagine such a man doing something like this. She decided not to ask any more questions.

Itachi, never one for conversation, said nothing more. In an oddly comfortable silence the four of them dug out the graves.

With four people working it took about an hour and a half to dig the six graves, place the bodies and then cover them up again.

When it was done Itachi dismissed his clones and stood beside her as she stared down at the fresh graves.

"They were all alive this morning, now they're in the ground." She sounded lost. "Am I supposed to say a prayer now?"

"If you like," Itachi said. "Or if you prefer say nothing or simply speak to them. What matters is that you say goodbye. You must try and make peace in the best way you can."

"I don't think I know how," Mina said softly.

"All you must..." Itachi suddenly stopped and jerked his head around. "Get behind me."

"What?"

He grabbed her arm and pulled her around so she was standing behind him. As she watched she saw two figures materialize out of the rain and approach them. They were rain nin.

The two ninja spotted Itachi and the girl with him. They came to a halt and offered him a deep bow. "Itachi-sama," one of them spoke. "It is a great honor to meet you. With respect, would you allow us to carry out our orders and deal with the girl? Her name is on a list."

Itachi calmly looked back over his shoulder at the girl. She was pale and shivering. "Mina, do you wish to live?"

She looked up at his eyes, they were dark and hard, but she thought she saw just a little bit of kindness as well. "Ye... yes."

"Very well then," he nodded once and turned back to face the two ninja. "I am afraid you cannot have her, she is now under my protection."

The two ninja looked at one another nervously. "I do not understand Itachi-sama."

"I have decided to make her my woman," he said serenely. "As such I will not allow any harm to come to her."

"Her fate has already been decided," the one argued as the other looked nervous. Clearly this one was one of the fanatics. "Our Lord has marked her for death, there are no exceptions. His word is absolute."

"I will not allow her to be harmed," Itachi readied himself. "Consider that your final warning. Now please leave."

As he'd expected the one who had spoken pulled out a kunai. Before he could even draw it back to throw a different one sliced into his right eye all the way to the hilt.

"Gurrrk," the ninja collapsed into the wet grass and began to twitch and spasm.

Taking out another kunai Itachi walked up to him and neatly sliced open his throat. His twitching stopped almost immediately. He stood up again and looked at the remaining ninja. "Since you do not seem to be a fanatic I trust you will leave now. If you do anything else you will have to die as well."

The other ninja did not say a word; he just turned around and fled.

As Itachi looked back to Mina she was staring at him open mouthed. "You killed him!"

"Yes," he said. He cleaned off his kunai and put it back in its holster.

"Don't you know what you've done?!" She said in horror. "You've killed one of *his* men! He'll have you killed for this."

"No he will not," Itachi said with certainty. "My leader knows my worth and it is far greater than that of one common foot soldier. Now let's go."

Carrying her in his arms he brought her back to his hotel room.

That night he awoke to find her standing over his bed. She had no clothing on. Even in the dark he could see her body was trim and her skin smooth and creamy. She lacked some of the curves other women had, but what was there looked very good to him.

"I have already told you, you do not have to do this."

He could see her face blush despite the low light. "I... want to; I want to thank you for what you did for me. And my body is the only coin I have. I... I know I am not really that beautiful, but please let me share your bed."

He'd had a few women. Even the great Uchiha Itachi was not made of stone. But those women had just been warm bodies to him. They'd helped him satisfy a need nothing more. But somehow he just knew that it would be different with her. *This is a mistake; I am not capable of love.*

But he pulled aside his blanket anyway and watched as she slipped into his bed beside him.

The next morning he was not surprised to find an astral projection of his leader standing there in the bedroom.

"EEK!!" Mina shouted in terror and hid beneath the covers.

Itachi meanwhile simply got up out of bed and started to dress. The astral image observed the scene for a moment before speaking.

"I am told you killed one of my ninja and took this woman for a lover." Pein said.

"It is true," Itachi replied. "I trust that given my service you will not deny me one woman."

The image of Pein shook his head. "If you want her she is yours, but her name remains on the list. When you are done with her she will be killed."

"Very well."

The image of Pein disappeared.

"You're going to let them kill me after you get tired of me?!" Mina said in horror.

"You have no reason to fear," Itachi told her and he continued to dress. "I will not abandon you. The simplest way to have you no longer in danger was to just agree to the terms."

Right then was the first time he'd seen Mina smile. "Well, just to be on the safe side I guess I'll have to make you fall in love with me Itachi-kun."

He stared at her. *Itachi-kun?*

Present Day

"And that's how Itachi-kun and I first met."

Naruto was staring at her over an empty bowl. He'd eaten two whole servings of really good ramen while listening to the story. "Wow, and I thought how me and Hinata got together was interesting."

Mina smiled. "Naruto, you have no idea. Want some more ramen?"

"Yes please!" *Maybe this won't be so bad.*

Through the looking glass darkly

Author's Note: Before I get a whole bunch of angry reviews let me just make this clear, this chapter is an AU of how this story **might** end. As of right now it is **not** a part of the story's timeline.

Omake

Naruto took a deep breath and steadied himself. He focused on the tri kunai that he had planted in the ground. *I can do this, no doubt!* He made a single hand sign and vanished in a yellow flash. In the very next instant he reappeared standing over a tri kunai a hundred yards away.

"Aaaaah!" he cried out and collapsed.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata was already kneeling over him; she'd been waiting at this spot. She performed a diagnostic jutsu and placed a hand on his chest. A faint green glow surrounded her hand.

Naruto looked up at and her and tried to give her a playful smile, it took some effort. "I'm o.k. Hinata-chan," he reassured her.

She shook her head and looked down at him worriedly. "No you're not Naruto-kun, chakra exhaustion is serious! You can even die from it!"

Despite the weakness that had engulfed him he chuckled. "No way, there's no way I'm going to die from something like that. Especially not before I'm Hokage."

"Kid, I'd worry a lot more about getting the Hiraishin no Jutsu down and less about becoming Hokage." Jiraiya told him in a stern tone. "After all, you've only got a week left."

The fifteen year old grimaced. "You don't need to remind me, I'm trying as hard as I can." Where had the time gone? He'd been so busy the last three years. With missions and training and spending time with Hinata he'd been constantly busy. It wasn't like the time had been wasted. He'd reached the rank of Jonin, learned to master the four tail state, learned the sage arts and the use of natural chakra, invented the rasenshuriken perhaps the most lethal close combat jutsu ever, and along with many other triumphs had killed two members of Akatsuki. While there were still some people in the village who would never see him as anything but a monster most of Konoha acknowledged him now. When he walked down the streets people **looked** at him. A lot of them were even calling him Jiraiya's successor and the next Sannin. A few were even saying he would make a good Hokage. He had come a long way from the orphan brat everyone had despised. But despite so many successes there was still one glaring failure he needed to overcome.

As he struggled to get up Hinata grabbed hold of him. "Naruto-kun what are you doing?"

"I have to try again."

"No," she said with absolute authority. "You know the drill, we're going to the hospital and you're staying there your chakra reserves have recovered. Now let's go."

"But..."

The veins around her lavender eyes popped up and she gave him a look that made him want to hide. "I said let's go, now."

"Yes Hinata-chan," he replied meekly. He really hated some of the things Tsunade had taught her. Hinata had also changed greatly over the last three years. The most obvious change was her outward appearance. The shy pale little girl he'd known at the academy was long gone. In her place was an amazing beauty with long dark blue hair, fair skin, and an absolutely amazing body with curves everywhere a woman should have them. But that was only one of

the ways she'd changed. She was also a Jonin and a great medic nin. People saw her as Tsunade's successor and she too was being considered Sannin level. Along with medical jutsus she'd also mastered the gentle fist, surpassing Neji and even her father. The days when anyone thought of her as weak were also long past. And while she was still sweet and kind, all her time with her sensei had definitely rubbed off on her. She was much more assertive and willing to state her opinion. And when necessary she could also put Naruto in his place. Such as when he needed to go to the hospital.

Despite the changes he had only grown to love her more and more. When they were alone the rest of the world went away and she became his everything. Kissing her, holding her, just being close to her was heaven. He couldn't even imagine ever being without her.

He leaned against her as she held him close. Hinata looked at Jiraiya. "I'll take care of him."

Jiraiya nodded, for once choosing not to make one of his little jokes.

Naruto smiled confidently. "Don't worry ero-sennin, I've almost got it."

"That's great kid, but the distance between almost and got it is further than a man can see."

Naruto bristled at that. "Hey have some faith! I will definitely master it!"

"I'm sure you will kid," Jiraiya said. *But not quick enough.*

Hinata performed the shunshin and the two of them disappeared in a swirl of wind and leaves.

In his office the Hokage was sitting back in his chair, eyes closed. He was in pain. His bones ached and there was tightness in his chest. There was no one thing specifically wrong with him. It was simply that he was old and his body weary. Each day he seemed to ache

just a little more, seemed to get tired a little sooner. Worst of all his mind was beginning to fail him. There were gaps in his memory and he needed to be reminded of things. He would be speaking to one of his ninja and suddenly realize he had forgotten the man's name or just why he had wanted to speak with him. *It is a terrible thing to be betrayed by one's own body.* Few ninja made it to old age. That he had survived for as long as he had spoke volumes about his will and ability. But he knew the time was fast approaching when he would have to relinquish his position.

He knew just who his successor should be. Naruto was ready. He had proven himself time and again since that spectacular day when he had killed fifty enemy ninja during the attack on the village. His courage and his ability had won over most of the ninja and villagers. He was sure Konoha would accept him as his successor, especially when he announced Naruto's heritage and gave him his birthright. Sarutobi intended to make his move on Naruto's sixteenth birthday. He would publicly name him Namikaze Naruto, son and sole heir of the great Yondaime. And at the same time announce his impending retirement with Naruto his successor. He was certain the Council and the village would accept him as the Fifth Hokage.

But there was one critical problem.

Two Weeks Earlier

"I trust you understand that everything I have shown you is an S-rank secret and must remain classified." Sarutobi said.

"Of course," Hiashi muttered. He was still going over the documents Sarutobi had handed him. The disbelief on Hiashi's face had been obvious; it was one of the very few times Sarutobi could recall ever seeing him surprised. "These documents are genuine?"

The Hokage didn't blame the man for his suspicion. "I assure you that they are. When I present them to the Council they will be openly validated. Naruto is the Yondaime's son. Upon his sixteenth birthday

he will legally inherit the Namikaze mansion and fortune, which I believe is currently valued at upwards of half a billion ryu. He will also be head of the reestablished Namikaze clan with all the privileges and rights due him."

"Incredible, the Yondaime had an heir," Hiashi did not look pleased. "How could this information have been kept from the Council?"

"It was done to try and keep Naruto safe," Sarutobi answered unconcerned. "The Yondaime had too many enemies outside the village. And too many people inside would have tried to gain influence over him to try and use him."

"He would have been better off had the Council known of this."

You or some other clan would have been better off certainly.

"Perhaps, but as Hokage it was my decision to make." If the Council had known the truth Naruto would definitely have been adopted by one of the clans, Kyuubi or no Kyuubi. In many ways Naruto would have been much better off if that had happened. But Sarutobi had been afraid of the influence any one clan would have gained over him. Naruto would have become nothing but a tool, used for the potential power and wealth he would eventually provide. There had also been the very real danger of an, 'accident' that would have rid the village of the Kyuubi and set up the adopting clan as the eventual heirs of the Namikaze fortune. "In any case I did not show you these classified documents in order to debate the past."

Hiashi leaned back carefully in his own seat, expression blank. "And why have you shown them to me Hokage-sama?"

"Along with everything else I intend to announce my retirement and to name Naruto my heir."

"I see," Hiashi replied serenely. He gave no hint as to what he thought of the momentous news.

"Of course," Sarutobi said warily. "It would be impossible to name him successor were he bound to the service of one of Konoha's clans. The Hokage must treat every clan fairly and with an open hand. He cannot be beholden to anyone except the village."

"In other words, making him a cadet branch member of my clan and placing the caged bird seal upon him would disqualify him from consideration."

Sarutobi nodded slightly. "Exactly."

Hiashi looked him directly in the eye. "Unfortunate."

Despite his own self control Sarutobi let out a small grunt. He'd hoped Hiashi would see reason. He'd hoped the man would be willing to put the good of the village ahead of that of his clan. But with that single word those hopes were dashed.

"I presume that the seal will have no effect on his inheritance?" Hiashi said coolly.

"No," Sarutobi replied. "That belongs to Naruto regardless."

"That is very pleasing to hear," the man got up to his feet. "Though he will technically be a Hyuuga rest assured that I will in no way interfere with his restoration of the Namikaze. In fact I shall permit Hinata to marry him. I had intended her to marry into the Inuzuka clan, but marrying the Yondaime's heir will serve even better."

"So you still intend to force Naruto into the Cadet Branch and place that seal on him?"

"Of course," Hiashi replied smugly. "Though I would not refer to it as, 'forcing him.' As one of the witnesses to our agreement you know full well that I did not coerce him in any way. It was, after all, his idea to begin with. I have honored the terms of our wager in every way, and when the time comes I expect he will honor his."

That was when Sarutobi did something he had not done in many, many years. He begged. "Hiashi, I plead with you, reconsider. You say Hinata will still marry him. That means that whatever happens Naruto will be bound to you as your son in law. Release him from this wager and not only will he be Namikaze clan head, but Hokage as well."

But Hiashi remained completely unmoved. "That is true; however any marriage can be dissolved through a simple divorce. And even if married to my daughter Naruto has shown a constant penchant for acting impulsively and irrationally. Simply being married to Hinata might not guarantee me sufficient influence on his future decisions. Whereas with the seal there can be no doubt of that. I believe my clan will be best served by making Naruto a cadet branch member."

"And what of the village?" Sarutobi demanded angrily. "You would deny Konoha the leader it needs just for your own selfish reasons?"

"I see nothing selfish in doing what I think best for my clan," Hiashi answered stiffly. "I am doing nothing more than honoring the bargain Naruto and I made and that you witnessed. Are you *ordering* me to allow Naruto to break his word?"

"No," Sarutobi said bitterly. "It is not my place to interfere with the inner workings of the clans. If you insist on placing the seal on Naruto I will not interfere."

Hiashi nodded graciously. "Thank you Hokage-sama, it is good to know you are a man of honor."

The door to his office opened and Sarutobi opened his tired eyes to see Jiraiya.

"Please tell me Naruto succeeded," Sarutobi said.

"Afraid not," Jiraiya answered. "Right now he's in Konoha General getting treated for chakra exhaustion."

"Can anything be done to assist him? Can you give him lessons on chakra control?" Sarutobi knew he was clutching at straws, but he was desperate.

"It's got nothing to do with chakra control," Jiraiya said. "The kid's control is actually pretty damn good these days, and of course he'd got no shortage on the capacity side."

"Then why does he suffer from chakra exhaustion every time he attempts the Hiraishin no Jutsu?"

"To be honest I have no idea," Jiraiya said glumly. "Even with Naruto's help I can't even get as far along as he has. He's gotten this far almost completely on his own, and I'm afraid he'll have to figure the rest out on his own. I'm sure he will... eventually."

"But not soon enough? Tell me the truth Jiraiya; do you think there is any chance that Naruto can successfully complete the Hiraishin within the next seven days?"

"If anyone could it would be Naruto, he seems to do the impossible on a regular basis. But... I honestly can't see how this time. Even he admits he doesn't know what he's doing wrong or how to fix it."

"That is what I was afraid of." Sarutobi shut his eyes. *Forgive me Naruto, but I am certain that you are the one this village needs. I must do what is best for the village.* If Naruto had the caged bird seal placed on him he could never be Hokage. Sarutobi could not allow that to happen. "Jiraiya, I want you to go to the hospital and return here with Hinata. Make sure Naruto does not know where she is going or that I sent for her."

Jiraiya's suspicions were instantly ignited. "What are you up to old man?"

"I am going to ensure the village gets the leader it needs for the future, no matter what."

"But why does the Hokage need to see me?" Hinata asked. "Naruto needs me right now."

"Naruto is going to be just fine," Jiraiya assured with a grin. "I'm sure he's already complaining that he doesn't need to be there."

"That's true," Hinata admitted. "But why is my coming here a secret?"

"I have no idea, we can both find out together."

The two of them landed not outside the Hokage Tower but in a nearby building. From there they went into the basement and took a secret underground passageway into the Tower. Hinata had never suspected that such a thing existed, or that there were secret passages in the walls of the tower itself that could take you all the way up to the Hokage's office unobserved. When she and Jiraiya stepped out of the hidden doorway she found the Hokage present with two other people.

"Kiba-kun? Tsume-san? What are the two of you doing here?" Hinata could not imagine what could be so secret and involve her old teammate and his mother.

"Hey Hinata-chan," Kiba greeted her warmly. "I don't know what's going on; the Hokage just ordered me and my mom to come here without drawing any attention."

"Just what is this about?" Inuzuka Tsume asked.

"This is about who will be the one to take my place." Sarutobi answered as he removed some documents from a folder. "I am convinced there is only one person who can be the type of leader this village will need. I am going to ask each of you to make a sacrifice for the good of the village to assure that Konoha gets the Hokage she needs."

"Hokage-sama, I don't understand at all," Hinata complained.

"Before I go any further please read these documents. And so we are clear, everything I am about to say to you or show you is an S-ranked secret."

Still confused she took one of the documents and began to read. When she realized what she was holding her face took on a look of shock similar to the one her father had had.

Bored, bored, bored. Naruto was bored out of his mind waiting to be released. He hated being stuck in a hospital. Especially now when he absolutely had no time to waste. He had only a week to figure out the Hiraishin and win his bet. That he would do it he didn't doubt for a second. He had two dreams now, to become Hokage and to marry Hinata-chan. Both depended on his being able to work the Hiraishin before his birthday. That meant he would definitely find a way... though he wasn't exactly sure *how* just yet.

When the door to his room opened he was relieved. Maybe it was a doctor come to let him go. When he saw it was Hinata he smiled, he didn't mind being stuck here if he could be stuck with her. He was even happier to see she had some food with her, a cake it looked like.

She held the cake in one hand and shut the door with the other and then locked it. She put the cake down on the stand next to his bed and then went over to the window and drew the blinds shut.

"Hey Hinata-chan," he said cheerfully. "What's with the serious face? You're not still worried about me are you?"

She turned her loving eyes to him and came over to his side. "I am always worried about you Naruto-kun." As he watched she took out a single wax candle and put it in the cake. She then lit it. "Happy birthday."

"Huh? Hinata-chan my birthday's not until the tenth remember?"

"No," she said with all seriousness. "Today is your birthday. Blow out the candle and make a wish Naruto-kun."

"But today isn't..."

She pressed a finger to his lips and cut off his protests. "Today is your birthday Naruto-kun, you are sixteen." She gave him a huge smile. "Now please blow out the candle and make your wish."

He stared at her a moment. Something was definitely wrong with her. "Are you feeling o.k. Hinata-chan?"

"I'm fine Naruto-kun, but please make your wish we only have so much time."

Not understanding what was going on he decided to humor her and blew the candle out with a quick breath.

"What did you wish for?"

He laughed. "To learn the Hiraishin of course!"

She nodded. "So that you can be Hokage one day?"

"No, so that I can marry you." He said. "I'll definitely be Hokage one day no matter what, but I want to be able to marry you without any thing getting in the way."

He'd expected his answer to make her really happy. But instead she was staring at him, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Hinata-chan what's wrong? Did I say something I shouldn't have?"

"Of course not!" She quickly wiped her eyes. "How could what you said have been wrong?" She was dressed in her usual dark black ninja clothing. It didn't show any of her skin but did a great job of displaying her curves. She reached behind and began to unzip her top. "I talked to Tsunade; she promised no one will bother us for half an hour."

As a stunned Naruto watched Hinata calmly pulled off her shirt and sleeves, revealing a black lace bra and nothing else. "Wha... what are you doing?" He asked weakly.

As he continued to watch from his bed she pulled her pants down. Her panties matched her bra. "I have waited my entire for you Naruto-kun," she said calmly. She reached behind again and there were a couple, 'snaps.' Her bra fell to the floor revealing a pair of magnificent and luscious breasts. "I decided I would give myself to you on your sixteenth birthday. That is what I am here to do." She pulled down her panties and stepped out of them. She then climbed into this narrow hospital bed.

"Hinata-chan," he squeaked. "We... we can't I... I promised your father you'd be a virgin when we married."

"For once Naruto-kun," she whispered as she pressed her body down onto his. "Just this once, please forget your promise."

He was in nothing but a hospital gown so he could feel her body rubbing against his. His sudden excitement and fear was driving him crazy. But he at least tried to do the right thing. "But... but... I..."

She smiled at him. *This is why I love you so; you always keep your promises and do the right thing.* "It's all right my darling, just for this one moment it's all right. I love you."

She brought her mouth down on his and that was the end of any argument.

When she arrived at the Inuzuka compound the entire clan had been gathered along with their dogs. To her surprise many of the dogs began to whine or even snarl at her, while most of the ninja seemed to be sending her dirty looks.

"What's wrong?" Hinata asked. "Am I late?"

Kiba looked really embarrassed while Akamaru had his head down and was whining softly.

"It's not that," Kiba tried to explain. "It's that uh, well..."

"We can all smell Naruto's scent on you, along with your pheromones and other glands. We all know you just had sex." Tsume spoke up without making any effort to be discreet.

Hinata blushed a deep red. "I'm... I'm so sorry I didn't mean to... to..."

"Fuck someone before you married my son?" Tsume offered with a snarl.

Hinata lowered her head in shame. "I'm..."

"That's enough!" Kiba said loudly. He glared at his mom and then at his assembled clan. "Hinata told me what she was going to do and I'm o.k. with it! I know what it's like to love someone with your whole heart, even if you can't be with them." He looked at Hinata and gently took a hold of her hand. "Since this happened before we married I can accept it so I expect all of you to not make a big deal out of it. Hinata's a good girl and I know she'll keep her wedding vows and be a good wife to me."

Tsume sent her son a look of surprise sprinkled with a little admiration. "Well, if my boy can accept it then I guess we can too." She looked out over everyone. "It's not to be mentioned ever again, clear?" All around her heads bobbed up and down obediently. "All right then, we have a marriage to perform."

Naruto was asleep when the doctor came to release him. Since he was also naked at the time it was a little embarrassing. When he made it home he'd expected to find Hinata there waiting for him. He was a little disappointed to see she there was no sign of her. But

after what had happened it was impossible to feel bad. He went to bed and hoped she would be there to join him soon.

"Get up kid"

Naruto opened his eyes to see his sensei standing over him. "What! Hey ero-sennin what are you doing coming into my bedroom when I'm asleep?"

"Sorry," Jiraiya said with a dead pan. "I just couldn't help myself. You're just so cute!"

"WHAT?!" Naruto grabbed the blanket and tried to build a cocoon.

Jiraiya shook his head. "Enough joking around kid the Hokage wants you in his office now."

Naruto had a guilty expression. "I swear nothing happened yesterday!"

Jiraiya just sighed.

When Naruto and Jiraiya arrived in the office there was the Hokage sitting quietly behind his desk while Hiashi and Tsume were *screaming* at one another. But as surprising as that was his eyes were quickly brought somewhere else. Hinata was here with Kiba and they were *holding hands*.

"Hey!" Naruto shouted angrily. "What the hell do you think you're doing holding Hinata's hand?!"

Kiba just laughed. "Why shouldn't I be holding my wife's hand?"

It was like someone had punched him right in the stomach. "Wife? Hinata-chan what the hell is he talking about?"

She looked down; she couldn't bear to face him right now. "I'm sorry Naruto-kun, but I decided I couldn't take the chance on you. I don't want to be married to someone in the Cadet Branch. I married Kiba-kun yesterday. I am his wife."

Naruto felt as if the world had just stopped and tossed him off. This couldn't be. They loved each other. They were the ones who were supposed to be together forever. How could she be married to someone else?

Hearing his daughter's words only set off Hiashi on a fresh torrent. "You are not married! Tsume had no right to marry you to her son!"

"I most certainly did you lying bastard!" Tsume screamed at him. "We had already agreed she would marry him on her sixteenth birthday! All I did was move things up a few months at her request."

"There was no signed marriage contract!"

"Marriage contracts aren't required for marriage! All they're for is to establish the dowry and any special conditions! You should be happy! You just saved five million ryu, plus whatever the wedding would have cost."

Hiashi turned furiously to the Hokage. "I demand you annul this marriage immediately!"

"I will do no such thing," Sarutobi said calmly.

"How dare you interfere with my clan this way?"

"I am not interfering with your clan," Sarutobi said pointedly. "This is a matter *between* clans where I most certainly do have authority. Hinata and Kiba both legally became adults the moment they became Genin. And as Tsume has rightly pointed out you did seem to give your blessing to the match."

"That was before I found out that..."

"If you reveal an S-rank secret you will be executed on the spot." Sarutobi warned him.

Hiashi was forced to shut his mouth. That law applied to everyone, even clan heads.

"And of course," Sarutobi continued smoothly. "Since Hinata has violated the agreement you made with Naruto he is no longer bound by it."

"You did this," Hiashi said. "You arranged all this just to free Naruto from his own bet."

Naruto looked up and sent a betrayed look at the Hokage.

"You're wrong father!" Hinata suddenly spoke up. "I did want to marry Naruto, but only if it meant I could finally be free of the clan. When I finally realized he was going to have the seal placed on him I knew I couldn't marry him." She turned and embraced Kiba. "I have always secretly loved Kiba; I went to the Inuzukas and begged Tsume to let me marry him. The Hokage had nothing to do with it, it was all my choice!"

He stared at her and the way she was holding Kiba. She'd secretly loved him? How could she? Then was everything between them... had it all really meant nothing to her?

"Hinata-chan," he called out to her. "How can you say that?" He could feel his heart breaking.

She looked at him. She answered but did not let go of Kiba. "I'm sorry Naruto-kun, I loved you, I really did. But I finally realized I couldn't marry you."

I loved you... but... couldn't marry you. "Hinata-chan..." he couldn't stand it anymore. He turned and ran away.

Six Months Later

All Konoha was in the plaza below staring up at him. At his side were those few precious people who had really believed in him and stood by him. Sarutobi and Jiraiya looked on with simple pride. Iruka had a huge smile and was obviously as excited as he was. Kakashi was standing there with his nose in a book. *Stupid sensei!* And of course, his girlfriend Sakura. He wasn't sure he would have made it over his heartbreak without her. Life was really funny sometimes. For so long he had chased her without result. But then when he'd really needed her she'd been there, offering him her love and devotion without asking for anything in return.

This was his moment, what he had fought and struggled for all his life. He was filled with excitement and joy. But there was just the tiniest little bitter sweetness too. There was one other very special person he'd wanted to be here to share this with. In the end he hadn't asked her. If she were here it would hurt Sakura. And it wouldn't be right to invite her without inviting her husband too, and he didn't think he'd be able to look at Kiba's smug smile without killing him.

It still hurt, but only a little. He smiled out at the crowd. He was already wearing his custom made white robes with orange flames. He took the big Hokage hat and placed it on his head. "From this day forward I will lead and protect you!" he shouted down. "For I AM the FIFTH HOKAGE!"

The entire plaza exploded in thunderous cheers.

The loudest cheers came from a woman with clear lavender eyes who was crying even as she shouted joyously.

I love you Naruto-kun and I always will.

Maybe it's a symbol

Author's Note: I wrote way back at the beginning of this story that I have trouble judging my own work, what will be popular and what will not be. As proof of that I offer this; I actually thought people would enjoy the last chapter.

Yeah, I actually believed that.

Needless to say I was not expecting to check my email and find more than 120 reviews waiting for me, with over ninety percent being negative. With those ranging from just plain disappointed to overflowing with outrage and grief. The review from Selonianth summed up the response nicely I think.

smacks the author and walks away

Sorry. To those of you who asked **why** I decided to put something like this in here now my answer is simple. The idea came to me and I (honestly!) thought it would make a nice little chapter. And to make this crystal clear, what happened in the last chapter is an **AU** and **not** the regular storyline. So please, no reviews asking why Naruto is thirteen again when he was the Hokage just last chapter.

Given the huge negative response I decided to hurry up and post another chapter before I found myself surrounded by an angry mob with torches and pitchforks.

Oh, and about this chapter I already **know** the physics are wrong. But what I have written is necessary for the story. So I beg you no reviews telling me that what I say is wrong.

He was once again in the Uchiha compound. This time he had come without the Hokage. After his usual morning work outs with Fukasaku had sneaked into the tea house and made his way through the

secret passage. He could be working on the Hiraishin, or working on taijutsu with a couple hundred cloned sparring one another or he could be doing a dozen other things that would make him a stronger ninja. Instead he was doing **this**.

"You know I'm going to complain to the Hokage about this." Naruto said.

Itachi looked unconcerned. "You are free to do so, though I would remind you that you are only here because the Hokage requested I train you as a personal favor." Itachi lifted one his eyebrows a fraction of an inch. "In any case did you not say you would do anything if it made you a better ninja?"

"I was expecting some super tough training like I got from the perv or Ebisu or Fukasaku. What the heck is this supposed to teach me?"

At the moment they were both standing in the middle of five foot wide circles facing one another. They were standing right in front of Itachi's home out in the hot afternoon sun.

"This is meant to teach you patience and self discipline," Itachi replied.

"What are you talking about?" Naruto demanded. "I have those things. When it comes to training or studying jutsu I have all the patience in the world and I don't need help to work hard. Just ask ero-sennin if you don't believe me."

"I am sure that you do have a great deal of self motivation and a good work ethic. Otherwise you would not be wearing that vest. However, those are not the things that you need to develop."

Naruto sent him a confused look. "But you just said..."

"Patience is not the same as a work ethic; self discipline is different from self motivation." Itachi began to explain patiently. "It is only natural for one to be willing to exert great efforts on a task one

enjoys. I once knew an artist who would go out and spend the entire day, dawn to dusk, painting. He thought nothing of putting forth such an effort each day for weeks or even months on end."

"So?" Naruto asked. "What has that got to do with this?"

"That same fellow, who thought nothing of spending hours in the hot sun or bitter cold to paint, would always complain bitterly when he was forced to teach others in order to make a living. It did not matter that the conditions in his classroom were milder or that the two activities were not of themselves any more or less strenuous. One activity he did without complaint while the other he saw as simple labor. Why do you suppose that was?"

Naruto shrugged, he honestly didn't see the point. "I don't know."

Itachi frowned at him. "The point is that the man was interested in painting but not in teaching. One gladly puts in unbelievable amounts of time and effort into activities one enjoys, but resents doing the same when the activity is seen as labor. The reason you are able to put in so much time and effort into your training is that you enjoy it. Even activities that seem dull and repetitive to others hold your interest because you see them as making you a stronger ninja. However not everything you do will always hold your interest. There is no avoiding long hours of dull activities such as guard duty or performing surveillance on a target. Also..."

Itachi's hand moved like a blur and a kunai was sent flying straight at his chest.

"Hey!" On pure instinct Naruto dived to his right and only just avoided being hit as the kunai went sailing just above him. Sprawled out in the dirt he looked up furiously at Itachi. "What the hell was that? Are you trying to kill me?"

"If a Chunin cannot avoid one kunai then I would have to consider this village a lost cause," Itachi said easily. "As I was saying, along with having to take on tasks you may consider boring you will also

need to maintain focus while performing them. That is where self discipline comes into play. A ninja who cannot keep his mind focused even while performing dull duty will find himself and his comrades dead."

"You never said anything about throwing kunai at me," he said as she stood up and dusted himself off.

"Surprises are a useful training tool," Itachi said.

"That's not fair," Naruto grumbled.

Itachi looked at him with surprise. "Surely by now you must know that there is nothing fair about either a ninja's existence or about life in general."

Naruto let out a sour grunt. He certainly knew how true that was. "How would you like it if I were to throw kunai at you?"

"Please do," Itachi encouraged. "The whole reason I am here in a circle as well is not only to observe you but to give you an example of what should be done. Only after I am satisfied that you have the necessary mental state will we move onto other training."

"I see well that's really..." Without any warning Naruto pulled out a shuriken and sent it straight for Itachi's chest.

Rather than duck or move out of the shuriken's path Itachi's right hand swept out in front of him. There was tiny, 'clink' and the shuriken was deflected into the ground just a few feet away. In Itachi hand was a kunai Naruto hadn't seen him grab. Itachi nodded his head in approval. "Very good, I see you have some potential for the training I have planned for you." With a flick of his wrist he sent the kunai flying at him again.

Naruto's eyes bulged when he saw where the kunai was aimed. He jumped straight in the air and performed a leg splits as the blade

went sailing just *below* him. "What the hell were you aiming for?!" Naruto shouted half in anger and half in terror.

Itachi gave him a very slight grin. "I am just making sure to keep your attention."

The training continued for six hours before Itachi finally called an end to it. At that point Naruto just collapsed to the ground, more from nerves than actual exhaustion. The training session had been more nerve racking and mentally draining than anything outside of real combat. He'd been forced to spend hours doing nothing but keeping his eye on his sensei. And whenever his mind would begin to wander Itachi seemed to notice and sent a kunai or shuriken his way. He'd actually gotten hit a couple times in the arm. Fortunately he'd healed up quickly and nothing vital had been struck.

He'd thrown his fair share of kunai as well but never came close to hitting Itachi. He couldn't even force him to dodge; the older ninja always just deflected his attack away. He never came close to surprising Itachi. When Itachi finally called a halt he informed Naruto they would be doing the same thing tomorrow then walked into his home.

With a groan Naruto took out a kunai and began drawing in the dirt as he tried to let his mind wander. This was reminding him a little of his training with Ebisu. At the very start the closet pervert had refused to teach him any jutsu until he'd improved his basics. At the time that had annoyed the hell out of him. But looking back now he had to admit that Ebisu-sensei had known what he was doing. You had to have the foundation in place before you could build something. Of course at his absolute worst Ebisu hadn't been even a hundredth as scary as Itachi was.

"Are you all right Naruto-kun?" a friendly voice called. Naruto looked up to see Mina smiling at him while holding a tray with a large bowl and glass. "You didn't come in so I thought I should bring your food out to you."

The smell of the hot food made his stomach growl. Naruto looked a little embarrassed, but Mina pretended not to have heard and set the tray down in front of him. "Thank you Mina! You are a life saver!" He sat up and got ready to dig in. "Itadakimasu!"

As he ate ravenously Mina laughed. "I can see you like my cooking."

Being hungry and having just finished a nerve racking training session he'd forgotten all about the manners that Hinata and Iruka had drilled into him. "Oh I'm sorry; I usually don't eat like this."

She just shook her head a bit and continued to stare down at him. "It's all right, I was raised in a little farm house with six brothers and sisters. I am not big on formalities, I'm just glad you like my cooking."

"Except for Hinata-chan's it's the best I've ever had."

"Well I'll take that as a high compliment. You know I think I would like to meet her sometime. From how you describe her she sounds like a very nice girl. You also make her sound like a complete contradiction from how Itachi-kun describes of the Hyuuga."

Naruto nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, Hinata-chan is sweet and nice and never thinks she'd better than anyone else. She'd nothing at all like the rest of her clan."

"She definitely sounds like someone worth meeting then." Mina let out a wistful sigh. "Unfortunately except for the Hokage and now you I haven't been allowed to meet anyone else in this village."

Naruto hadn't considered that. Out in the village there were wild rumors that Itachi was living a decadent lifestyle within the hidden Uchiha compound. People told stories about wild orgies with an entire harem of young girls. Obviously people had been inventing things and passing those tales as fact. Naruto could sympathize, there'd been plenty of stories about *him* that had passed through the village and been accepted as fact. No one in the village had any idea what the truth was.

"Do you get lonely?" Naruto asked.

"Oh no," Mina said with a smile. "I have Itachi-kun to keep me company and that's all I need. But it would be good to have a few friends to talk to."

"Well maybe I can bring Hinata-chan with me sometime."

"That would be lovely," Mina said. "But you would have to get the Hokage's permission first." She glanced at the ground around Naruto and noticed what he'd been drawing. "You seem to like drawing circles."

"They're not circles," he said as he took another bite of the tasty food. "They're symbols."

"Really?" Mina sounded a bit interested. "What are they symbols of?"

He gave her a sour smile. "I have no idea."

Mina laughed a bit. "I don't understand, they're symbols of something but you don't know what of?"

He nodded. "They appear on a ninja scroll over and over again. I know they're supposed to mean something, but I don't know what." Naruto knew he wasn't allowed to tell anyone about his studying the Hiraishin. But telling a civilian about a symbol on some random ninja scroll was safe enough.

Mina glanced at the circles drawn there in the dirt. "Maybe it's a symbol for the sun."

"Nope, can't be the sun." Naruto said immediately.

"Why not?" She asked curiously.

"Because whatever it represents is a component in a jutsu, so it can't be the sun."

"Well maybe it means sunlight," she took a stick and idly drew some rays around the biggest circle. "Could it be sunlight?"

Naruto opened his mouth to say no. *Wait a minute, **could** it be?* Sunlight didn't seem to have much substance, but then neither did the air that was the main component of a shunshin. The lighter the component used the farther the substitution or teleportation jutsu could be cast and the faster. "Does light have any actual weight?"

"What?" Mina looked perplexed.

"Light, does it have any substance? Even just a little?"

Mina shrugged and seemed a bit embarrassed. "I'm sorry Naruto, I didn't get much schooling."

"The answer to your question Naruto is yes," Itachi came out of the house. "Light is made up of elemental particles called photons, their weight is infinitesimal, but theoretically it would have substance." Itachi frowned at him. "Do they not teach basic physics at the academy anymore? The principles are vital for certain kinds of jutsus."

Naruto grinned and rubbed the back of his head. *Physics ?* That sounded vaguely familiar, Iruka might have mentioned something during a few of the lectures he slept through. "I wasn't really a very good student back then." Naruto admitted.

Itachi nodded. "No doubt you were lacking patience and self discipline."

Naruto sighed. "Yeah maybe I was Itachi-sensei." Maybe these exercises would be useful after all. And maybe, just maybe he had stumbled onto something really useful to him.

Light huh?

My favorite sensei

The school bell rang, signaling the end of class. The students all let out a relieved cheer as they quickly grabbed their books and started to get up.

"Before you go class," Iruka called out. "Remember we have a quiz tomorrow on basic jutsu theory. Also do problems one through five at the end of chapter seven."

The collective groan that arose made Iruka smile. They had actually thought he'd forgotten to assign homework.

"Iruka-sensei you give us way too much homework!" An angry boy with a scarf wrapped around his neck said.

Iruka looked at the outspoken youngster. "That's interesting coming from *you* Konohamaru, considering you haven't turned in your last two assignments."

"Heh, I uh, must have forgotten them." He said with an embarrassed grin.

"Well then please remember to turn both of them in tomorrow along with tonight's assignment. Otherwise I may have to schedule an appointment with the Lord Hokage to discuss your poor performance."

The cocky little kid suddenly turned about three shades of white. "No need for that Iruka-sensei! You don't need to bother granddad."

"Then I look forward to seeing all your homework tomorrow," Iruka said pleasantly.

Konohamaru slumped out of the class with a girl and a runny nosed boy trailing behind.

"Hah! You never change Iruka-sensei. I remember you threatening to go talk to the Hokage about me all the time too!"

A little startled Iruka turned around to see a certain former student and Chunin sitting in an open window sill. "Well I had to do what I could to motivate you back then Naruto. Let's face it; you weren't a very good student."

Frowning Naruto jumped down to the floor beside his former teacher. "It's not like I was dumb though! I mean you have to admit. Some of my pranks required a lot of thought and careful planning."

"Yes, which only made being your teacher even more frustrating." Iruka said dryly. Seeing Naruto's unhappy look Iruka decided not to bring up his performance in class again. For both of them it was a painful and depressing memory. "So anyway, what brings you here?"

Naruto gave him one of those big embarrassed smiles that Iruka was so familiar with. "Well... I sort of need to ask a favor."

"You want me to treat you to some ramen?" They had ramen together every week when Naruto was in the village, it was their own little tradition. But sometimes Naruto would show up out of the blue wanting Iruka to treat him.

"No, not that, actually what I want to ask you is kind of embarrassing."

Iruka gave him a knowing smile. "Do you need advice about Hinata?" He was surprised when Naruto shook his head.

"No, everything with me and Hinata is great. Anyway she's not even in the village right now."

"All right, then just how can I help you Naruto?" Naruto looked down and mumbled something under his breath. "I'm sorry I didn't catch that."

Naruto cleared his throat. "I said, can you teach me about physics."

Iruka stared at the boy and wondered if he had somehow misheard. "I'm sorry, but did you just say you wanted me to teach you about physics?"

Naruto gave a self-conscious nod of his head. "That's right, if it's not too much trouble could you teach me everything about physics that I should have learned in the academy?"

With a look of sudden look of alarm Iruka began glancing all about at the roof and walls of the classroom.

"What are you doing sensei?"

"Oh nothing," Iruka said. "Just wanted to see if the world was ending."

"Hey!" An outraged Naruto shouted.

Iruka had a good laugh and then got out one of his text books to begin tutoring him.

"Tsunade-sensei, we really shouldn't be here." Hinata said. "Aren't you supposed to stay out of places like this? Wasn't that one of the daimyo's conditions?"

Tsunade smiled excitedly. "It's just a teeny tiny little bending of the rules. I'm sure no one will mind." Tsunade looked around the huge casino. *Mommy's home!*

"You're not planning to borrow money to gamble are you?" Hinata said worriedly. Naruto had told her all about how she had wound up millions in debt and how the Daimyo had cleared the debt in exchange for her returning to work in the village.

"Not to worry," Tsunade said. She reached into her green coat and pulled out a wad of ryu notes. "I've got my stakes right here."

"Where did you get that from?"

"What? You think I'd give all those lectures for *free*?" Hinata was a good girl and a promising medic nin, but she had a lot to learn. "Now since today is the last day of the medical conference I thought we could have a little fun."

"But aren't there other ways to have fun besides gambling?"

"Sure, but they usually involve good looking men and lots of sake."

Hinata's face went red as a tomato.

Tsunade had a good laugh. But honestly she was happy for Hinata, maybe even a little jealous. She had found the one man she truly loved and the two of them were happy together. She only hoped that kami was far kinder to her and Naruto than it had been to her and Dan.

"Say Hinata, why don't you join me?"

Hinata was surprised by the suggestion. "I'm sorry sensei, but I don't want to gamble."

"Well actually, I had something else in mind." Tsunade said quietly. "Your byakugan lets you see everything for a 360 degree radius right?"

"Yes," she answered. The blind spot in her family's blood line was a carefully guarded secret.

"Well you know I just happen to have a radio communicator with an ear piece and I was thinking..."

Hinata gasped, shocked that the legendary Sannin could even hint at such a thing. "Sensei you want to *cheat!*"

The last word brought attention from everyone nearby. Tsunade grabbed her student by the arm and hurried along to another section of the massive building. "Not so loud," she said in a low voice. "And it wouldn't be cheating; you would just be using your ninja abilities to give your sensei a little advantage."

Hinata shook her head. "This isn't a mission; you just want me to help you win at the poker table. Using my byakugan in that way would be dishonorable, I'm sorry sensei but I can't do it."

Tsunade tried to persuade her but Hinata refused to budge on the issue. Since starting to spend time with Naruto and especially since being apprenticed to Tsunade she'd learned how to stand up for herself. (With everyone except her father.) Finally Tsunade was forced to give up trying to persuade her to help.

"Fine," an exasperated Tsunade finally said. "If you don't want to help why don't you just take a seat at the table?"

"I can't do that!"

"You have some money don't you?"

Hinata nodded. She was from a rich clan and had all her needs taken care of. So she rarely spent much of the money she earned on her missions. She had a tidy sum with her. "Well yes, but I don't know how to play."

"No problem, I'll explain the basics to you."

"But..."

"If you're wanting to make sure I don't get into too much trouble at the poker table the best way to keep an eye on me would be to join the game." Tsunade said reasonably.

Hinata didn't like it, but she decided that she would do it in order to try and keep Tsunade from getting into too much trouble. "Very well,

please teach me how to play."

Wonderful, Tsunade thought. *It'll be much easier to dominate the table with a weak player in the game.* Tsunade knew that she was sort of taking advantage of her student, but figured it would be a valuable life lesson for her. Besides she was rich so it wasn't like she would miss the money she would lose.

"What's wrong Naruto? Are you not feeling well?" Ayame asked. "It's not like you to leave anything in your bowl."

"It's nothing," Naruto answered bravely. "I just spent the last three hours being tortured by Iruka-sensei."

"Well it was your idea Naruto." Iruka said as he had some more ramen.

"Wait, you asked Iruka to torture you?" Ayame looked confused.

"Worse I asked him to teach me something," Naruto groaned.

Iruka chuckled a bit at the antics. "Well, did you learn what you wanted to Naruto?"

Naruto slowly nodded his head. "Yeah, I think so," he paused for a moment. "Say Iruka-sensei, could I ask you a hypothetical question?"

"Sure."

"Well I've been wondering about something. In teleportation and substitution jutsus the smaller the uh... mass something has the farther the jutsu can be performed. It can also be performed faster and use less chakra, right?"

"That's right Naruto," Iruka nodded his head well pleased. That was actually a very good summation of basic principle. "Of course the

other side to that is the fact that the less mass used the more difficult it is focus the jutsu. That is why a substitution with say a log, is easier to perform than a shunshin using air and leaves."

"O.k., but what if I wanted to use something smaller than air?" He wasn't allowed to tell Iruka about the Hiraishin. But a few hypothetical questions should be safe enough.

"Ah!" Iruka smiled in sudden understanding. "So that's why you wanted to learn about physics. You're thinking of inventing some new jutsu aren't you?"

No, I'm trying to learn someone's jutsu. "Pretty much."

"Well I admire your imagination Naruto, but I'm afraid there's not much point."

"What do you mean?" Naruto sounded a little upset and began to pout. "Are you saying you don't think I'm smart enough?"

"It's not that," Iruka assured. "It's just that what you're trying to do is basically impossible, even if it *might* be possible in theory."

"Why's that?"

"Well, when you use air for a jutsu what you're actually using are oxygen atoms which make up most of the air we breathe. Since atoms are the smallest forms of matter that can be manipulated using chakra there's nothing smaller."

"What about photons?" Naruto asked.

"Impossible," Iruka answered.

"Why? If atoms can be used why not photons?"

Iruka sighed. *Typical Naruto, once he gets an idea in his head he doesn't like to let go, even when the idea is unworkable.* "Two reasons, size and speed. A photon is infinitesimally smaller than an

atom. It's like comparing a pebble to a mountain. Just as manipulating air and leaves is harder than manipulating a log trying to manipulate photons would be a thousand times more difficult than doing the same with atoms."

"So I'd have to get better chakra control."

Iruka shook his head. "It's not just a matter of chakra control, though that would be an essential element, you would have to develop a mental focus and a *feel* for the photons. You can't use an element until it's so completely familiar to you that you can almost create it with your mind as you perform the hand signs."

Naruto understood what Iruka meant. A jutsu was as much a mental exercise as physical. Hand signs helped you draw the chakra out into the exact form you intended, but if your mind wasn't focused on the exact result you wanted the jutsu either wouldn't work or it would work poorly. The most obvious example of this was trying to use a henge. No matter what image you wanted to take on the hand signs were exactly the same. The difference came from the picture you had in your mind. When he made a rasengan he pictured a tightly packed swirl of power. When he used forcing he imagined energy flowing into his legs and arms.

"But Iruka-sensei, when I perform a shunshin I think of leaves swirling in wind. I don't think of oxygen atoms."

"True," Iruka agreed. "But your mind can see wind as a *thing* with physical substance. You've felt the wind beat against your face. Therefore your mind can grasp air as something with a real physical presence. But photons are different. You have felt the warmth of the sun but light doesn't push against you no matter how bright it may be. It's only natural for your mind to not think of light as a physical substance. In order to train yourself to use photons you would somehow have to convince your own mind that light has substance and then you would have to find a way to gather photons, the way you gather air and leaves or a log."

"That doesn't sound too hard."

"Oh really? Why don't you henge into a beam of light?"

Naruto gawked at him. "I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know how to become something like that."

"And that's just the beginning of the problem."

"Well it's not like I could henge into air."

Iruka ran through some hand signs. "**Henge no Jutsu.**" Before his eyes there was a puff of smoke. When the smoke cleared there was a tiny swirl of air floating above the stool Iruka had been sitting on.

"No way!" Naruto shouted excitedly.

After just a few seconds there was another puff of smoke and Iruka was sitting on the stool again. Naruto noted that Iruka's face was a bit red and he seemed to be huffing a little.

"Iruka-sensei how did you do that?"

Iruka had a slight smile. It was kind of fun still being able to impress his old student once in awhile. "You can turn into anything with a physical signature, from a house to an elephant to a puddle of water to some air. But there are limits, and things with much more or much less mass than you have are very difficult to maintain. I could henge into Kakashi and stay that way all day, I could be an elephant or a house for a few minutes at most, and air for just a few seconds."

"You know sensei, becoming air would be an amazing ability, especially for spying on someone." He had never thought about that. Being a wind type and having loads of chakra he began thinking about the possibilities. *But it would only be useful if I could maintain it for longer than just a few seconds.* Still... possibilities.

Iruka nodded. "But I could never become light. It's impossible for me to mentally see light as being physical."

"Wait, so if I could henge into light that would help me use photons?"

"Well... theoretically I suppose it could. But..."

"Iruka-sensei you're the best!" He jumped off his stool and gave his favorite sensei a hug. "Thanks for all your help sensei! I've got to go."

"Where are you going all of a sudden?"

"I need to start practicing how to henge into light! See ya!" He quickly ran off.

"Wait!" Iruka called after him. "I haven't even mentioned the problem with speed it..."

Ayame laughed. "I think he's gone already."

Iruka shook his head. "You know Naruto really does manage to come up with some interesting ideas sometimes."

"Well that goes without saying of someone who once painted the Hokage monument." Ayame said.

"Well, interesting ideas aren't always good ones."

Ayame smiled as she filled his cup. "You know I think it's very sweet how you watch out for him. The way you treat him to a meal every week, you are a very good man." She eyed him consideringly for a moment.

"What?"

"Just wondering," she leaned in a bit and smiled. "Are you doing anything this Sunday?"

Hinata stared at the huge pile of colored chips in front of her. "You know sensei you're right, this is kind of fun."

Tsunade had her head down in shame. For the *second* time she had lost to a child that had never even played cards before. *That's it I am never playing poker again!* She got up from the table. "All right let's get packed for the trip home. Oh, and by the way..."

"Yes, sensei?"

She laughed weakly. "Since I'm broke could you lend me some money?"

Mission to Tsuyama

Amida looked down at the eight bodies. A whole family killed, no, not just killed... butchered. Masa and his whole family had been killed and their bodies torn apart. Masa, his wife, and their children, they'd been killed and their pieces had been scattered through the torn up house. And the most frightening thing about all this? The message scrawled in blood on one wall.

Guilty.

Guilty? Guilty of what for kami's sake? Masa had been a good man who'd grown up in the village and been a farmer all his life. So far as he knew he'd never done anything even remotely illegal. A simple farmer and a family man, a man like that wasn't likely to make enemies, especially not enemies that would resort to such violence. And what of the children? The youngest had only been four. What could Masa have done to have warranted this sort of violence?

Amida shook his head wearily. Just as with the previous attacks there were no obvious suspects or motives. And this was much worse, though the first two had been gruesome they had involved individuals who'd been caught alone on the road at night. Now a family had been attacked in their own home as they slept. What was going on?

He took another look at the message and exited the house. Outside were twenty men, all of them looking pale and nervous. They carried pikes and spears and kitchen knives. Tsuyama was a tiny farming community in hill country near the border of Fire. They lived a quiet isolated existence; their only contact with the wider world was when they brought their crops to market. They had no soldiers or police force other than him. He was the sheriff. Normally his duties involved a few minor disputes over grazing rights and the occasion drunken brawl. Amida was a big strong man who was patient and preferred settling things with words rather than with an arrest. He'd done well

enough in that role. But this... he'd never dealt with a murder before. Now he'd had ten take place in less than two weeks, and murders of such savagery. This was so far out of his league as to be laughable.

"Is it true?" One of the men called out.

"Aye it's true," Amida answered quietly.

The men he'd deputized began talking to one another nervously.

"What are you going to do sheriff?" Another man called and other repeated the question.

Amida slowly shook his head. "There's nothing I can do."

That brought some unbelieving shouts. These people were scared. The last thing they wanted to hear from him was that he was helpless.

"But you're the sheriff!" Someone yelled at him. "Stopping this is your job!"

"No," he called back sternly. "If you need to have someone break up a bar room brawl or find a missing calf then I'm your man. I can't deal with this. We need to send for help, we need ninja."

"Yes!" a man said excitedly. "Ninja would be able to deal with this no problem!"

"Ninja are expensive though," another said cautiously. "Can we afford them?"

Amida looked pointedly back to the house. "Can we afford not to get them?"

Everyone looked at the house and quickly they all nodded their agreement. Somehow or other they would have to find the money.

In the nearby woods a man watched as the little piggies gathered together to cry and wail and run around in panic. He laughed. What else could piggies do when there was a hungry wolf around?

"She brought you to a casino?!" Naruto said shocked. "And she made you gamble? That's unbelievable! What was grandma thinking?"

"Naruto, "Hinata said primly. "Please don't refer to my sensei as grandma. Anyway she was just trying to relax a little." She giggled a little. "Since I won it didn't turn out so badly."

"Serves baachan right, dragging her apprentice into a place like that."

"Well... it was a bit inappropriate, especially for a teacher of her standing. I'm sure Jiraiya would never do anything like that with you there."

Naruto stared at her with his mouth hanging open.

"Is something wrong?" Hinata asked.

Flashback

"Damn it ero-sennin do we have to do this every time?!" The original shouted while three shadow clones helped him drag Jiraiya out of the seedy gambling den. Of course his sensei was unconscious with a perverted grin on his face. He reeked of cheap booze and had lipstick all over his face.

"Heh, no, of course not." He paused. "You know I'm wondering just when they pervert is going to come back and help me with my training."

"Did he Hokage assign you someone to help you while he's away?"

"Yeah!" Naruto brightened immediately.

"Who?"

He opened his mouth but snapped it shut. "Ah, actually I'm not allowed to say, it's a secret." *I wonder what Hinata-chan would think if Itachi being my sensei? I'll need to ask the old man if I can tell her. It would be really great if she and Mina could meet.*

"It's a secret?" Hinata asked in surprise.

"Yeah afraid so, sorry."

"If it's a secret then of course you can't tell me. I won't ask about it, I just hope you've made progress."

He thought about standing in that circle staring at those dark eyes, he shivered a little. "Well, I haven't learned any new jutsus or techniques yet. But I feel like I may learn a lot from him eventually." He had a sudden bright smile. "Oh, and I think I may have made a big breakthrough with the hiraishin."

"Really?" Hinata asked excitedly. "Can you tell me about it?"

"Since you already know I'm studying the hiraishin sure," he was eager to talk to her. He'd missed Hinata so much while she'd been away. She wasn't just his girlfriend; she was also his best friend and the person he trusted the most. And of course she was also the best cook in the whole village in his opinion. "I think the dots in the scroll are symbols for light, so I..."

She listened to every word with her full attention. Their future together rode on his ability to perform the hiraishin. If possible she was even more focused on it than he was. If for some reason he couldn't solve the riddle of the Fourth's greatest jutsu... she didn't

even want to think about that. *Naruto will definitely do it, I believe in him.*

"So I figure if I can henge into light it will help me with the hiraishin."

"You want to turn into light Naruto-kun? How will you do that?"

He smiled and rubbed the back of his head. "I have no idea, but I'll figure something out."

She put her hand over her mouth and giggled. "I'm sure you will Naruto-kun, you always manage to do the impossible." His boundless confidence was one of the things she liked most about him. She checked the timer. "The roast is ready, sit down and I'll serve it."

Naruto sat down and tried to keep his mouth from watering too much. His girl was back and they were about to have another nice dinner together. With his progress on the hiraishin all seemed right with the world.

Sarutobi was frowning at the mission request his village had just received from the community of Tsuyama. They had sent in a very low offer, barely enough to qualify for a C-rank, along with a disturbing mission statement; capture or execute a murderer. Someone had killed ten people over a period of fourteen days and the locals were helpless against this killer. The mission did not bother the Hokage; ninja were often called in to perform police duties that were too difficult for the local authorities. The number of deaths also did not matter. What *did* disturb him was the lack of details. Ten killed over a period of two weeks, that was all. No mention of who the victims were or what the circumstances might be. Usually clients were eager to give out all the information they could in order to assist the ninja in their missions. The lack of any additional information was suspicious.

Still... a mission was a mission. The offer was so low as to not really make sending a full team cost efficient. One Chunin could be detailed to handle it. *This could be a good mission to give Naruto more experience. I'm sure he can deal with any non-shinobi killer, no matter how dangerous. And if by some chance this should be more he can always send for help.* Nodding to himself he made a slight notation on the scroll assigning it to Naruto.

Omake

"So you actually beat grandma in cards Hinata-chan?"

She nodded. "I did, and it was much more fun than I expected."

Naruto grinned at her. "You know Hinata-chan, I kind of like playing cards too; in fact ero-sennin says I have good gambling instincts. Why don't we play after we have dinner?"

"All right Naruto-kun, that sounds like fun."

His grin widened as Jiraiaya's influence suddenly became apparent. "And we can do something to make it more interesting."

"Naruto-kun," Hinata said with a severe frown. "I don't want you to get into the habit of gambling, even if you are good at it."

"Well what if we don't bet money?"

"Hmmm? What did you have in mind?"

15 minutes later

Naruto was sitting at the kitchen table with nothing on but his boxers with the cute frogs on them. Hinata was fully dressed and had all of his clothes neatly folded on the table in front of her.

"Full house, kings over nines," Naruto put his cards down.

"Sorry Naruto-kun," Hinata put her hand on the table. "Four queens."

"Nani?!" He stared at the the cards not believing it.

"You need to pay up."

He looked at her and his face turned several shades of red. "Hinata-chan you wouldn't really make me do it would you?"

"I'm sorry Naruto-kun," she said in a serious tone. "But this was your own idea. Maybe this will prevent you from gambling in the future."

"I guess you're right," he slowly stood up and readied to hand over the last article of clothing.

She nodded pleasantly. "And besides Naruto-kun," she suddenly had a huge smile as Tsunade's influence became apparent. "I've always wanted to see your cute little butt."

Naruto turned almost purple and fainted.

Author's Note: And so we are absolutely clear... the Omake does **not** happen in the actual story.

The wolf

It was the middle of a bright sunny day. All the attacks had taken place at night and so the locals still felt relatively safe during the day. Once the sun went down though people were barricading themselves into their homes and keeping weapons beneath the bed.

But it was day time now and they thought they were safe.

He watched her from the nearby woods. A little girl of eight or nine with a straw basket in her hand. She had light brown hair, almost dirty blonde and was skipping a bit as she went. There wasn't so much as a hint of fear scent on her. Did she know about all the terrible things that had been happening? Or had her family tried to shelter her? Parents did that sometimes, tried to keep their young ones from seeing how *truly* scary a place the world could be. As if their ignorance could somehow protect them.

Mayu was going around a bend in the road when she stopped. There standing in front of her was a man she had never seen before. She knew all the people in Tsuyama and she didn't know him. He was dressed in a long ragged looking grey cloak and trousers. On his head was a straw hat like the one her daddy wore in the field sometimes. The man's face was dirty, but his eyes stood out. They were grey eyes and when they looked at her she felt a little bit afraid.

"Hello," he called out. "And what is your name little girl?"

"Ma... Mayu," she answered nervously.

"Mayu," he repeated, savoring the sound of it. He savored the fear scent that was coming off her now even more. "Mayu-chan, would you like to play a little game with me?"

"I... I'm not supposed to talk to strangers." She held the basket in front of her. "I have to bring some eggs to market."

He smiled at her, and took a step forward. "You know your parents were right to teach you that, you really *shouldn't* talk to strangers. But we're already talking so it really doesn't matter now does it?"

"I su... suppose not," she said in a tiny voice.

"Then since we're already talking it won't hurt to play a little game, will it?"

"Bu... but the eggs..."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about the eggs. The eggs are the least of your worries." He took another step towards her. He fear smell rose. "So will you play? I promise you it won't take long and then I'll be on my way."

His grey eyes held her in place. She wanted to turn around and run but she felt like she could barely even move.

"Will you play?" He asked her again patiently.

She slowly nodded. "What do you wa... want to play?"

"It's a simple game," he told her. "It's called wolf and rabbit. You run for your life while I chase you and try to eat you."

Trembling she began to back away from him. "I... I don... don't think I want to play that."

He laughed softly. "The rabbit never does, but it's soooo much fun for the wolf." He grunted in pain and began his transformation.

Seeing what was happening she screamed and ran back the way she'd come, the basket and the eggs forgotten.

The transformation complete he stood there for about a minute to give her a little bit of a head start, otherwise it would be over in no time at all.

It took three days to reach Tsuyama. When Naruto finally got there it was nearly sunset. The place wasn't much to look at; it was about twenty small buildings gathered in one spot. Most of them were just thatch huts with four being bigger buildings made of wood. There wasn't even a street as none of the buildings were even in a line. There was no wall, no gate, so he just walked right into the place. There were a few people out and he headed towards some of them to introduce himself. The second they spotted him they froze. The women who were out grabbed their children and began running while the men took out clubs and knives and began coming towards him.

Naruto didn't need anyone to tell him this wasn't a proper greeting. He came to a stop and held his hands up. "Uh, hello, my name is Uzumaki Naruto. I am a Chunin from the Leaf village here to carry out an assignment."

"What the hell are you people doing?" A large blocky man came running out of one of the wood buildings. "He's the ninja we hired."

The group that had been approaching him halted. They weren't exactly an angry mob (Naruto had plenty of childhood experience with those) but they sure weren't happy to see him. Their looks changed from angry or afraid to sullen, a few of them spat in his direction as they dispersed. None of them apologized for almost attacking him or greeted him.

"Sorry about that," the big man who had called them off approached him and extended his hand. "I'm Amida, the local sheriff."

"Naruto. So what was that about? Usually the clients are happy to have the ninja arrive."

"Please forgive them; folks around here are sort of on edge. I'm sure being from Konoha you're used to violence and killing. To us it's been very hard to deal with."

Naruto slowly nodded. Being from Konoha, and being a ninja, gave him a very different perspective on violence. People living in a place like this wouldn't be used to it. "Yeah, I guess I can understand that. Ten people being killed would probably set people on edge."

"It's eleven now," Amida said sadly. "A little eight year old was torn apart... and we think part of her was eaten."

"Eaten?" Naruto paled a bit.

"Aye, all the victims were ripped apart. But this is the first one who had bite marks." He swallowed. "Most of her insides were missing and looked like they'd been eaten."

Naruto frowned. *They were ripped apart?* "I think I'm starting to see why there weren't any details on the mission request. Did you think we wouldn't take it if we knew something like that?"

"Sorry, but we just didn't want to take the chance. We could barely afford to pay and we were afraid you might turn us down or..." he hesitated.

"Yeah?"

Amida looked at the thirteen year old who didn't come all the way up to his chest. "We were afraid you might send someone who wasn't qualified to handle this."

Naruto gave the man a wide grin completely missing the innuendo. "Well no worries there!" he tapped his green vest. "Not only am I a Chunin I'm also one of the toughest ninja in my village. I'll definitely find this killer and deal with him!"

Amida glanced down at the loud blond, not sure what to make of him. "Well I hope you can, any way you must be hungry. Come to the jail with me and I'll get you a meal and tell you what I know."

The jail consisted of a single cell without a window and a sturdy looking iron door. There was also a tiny office right across from the cell and some living space behind that. Naruto got a bowl of beef stew as he listened to the sheriff tell him about the murders. There was surprisingly little to tell.

They'd started two and a half weeks ago when people found poor old Haruko lying torn and mangled all over the main road. At first they hadn't even realized it was murder. They'd assumed it must have been some wild animals. Then a few nights later the same thing had happened to Sadao. Sadao had been a strapping man in his prime and had a staff with him. Unlike Haruko who'd been an old man Sadao should have been able to protect himself. That and the fact they found no animal tracks and led them to believe that this was not just some random attack. When they'd found Masa and his family all doubt had been removed.

"No one from here could have done all this," Amida said. "That's not just cause we're a quiet folk. I can't imagine anyone who could do what was done. Those bodies got *torn* apart, no knives, no blades, just pure muscle. No one I know could do that."

"Well whoever it is I'll find him." Finishing the last of the stew he tossed the spoon back in the bowl. "No need to worry, I'm on the case now."

"How do you plan to find him?"

Naruto smiled. "I'm going to just look for him."

" **Kage Bushin no Jutsu.**" With a massive pall of smoke two hundred kage bushins came into existence. As they all shared his

thoughts no orders were necessary as they began to run in all directions. They would scour the area. Amida had told him that all the locals would be in their homes once it was dark. That meant anyone who he found outside now would be a suspect. While he didn't have the tracking abilities that Kiba or Shino would he could cover a hell of a lot more ground then either of them could. Everything for a five mile perimeter would be searched.

He was hidden in the branches of a tree as another one of the blonds started to leap past. For a moment he considered letting this one go too. Whoever the boy was, his eyes weren't very sharp. He was sure he could stay hidden for as long as he wanted. But where was the fun in that? As the clone was going past he tossed out a rusty kunai that went into its side and dispelled it with a puff of smoke.

A couple of miles away the original Naruto suddenly received that clone's memories. *Found you!* He changed direction and head for the spot where the clone had been dispelled. He couldn't mentally command his bushins once they were made, but as he passed some he shouted for them to join him. He had twenty with him when he arrived at the spot.

When he got there he was very surprised to see a man in a dirty old cloak and straw hat just standing there waiting for him. Naruto and his clones all landed and surrounded him pulling out their kunai and getting ready for a fight.

"Who are you?" Naruto demanded.

Underneath the pale moon light the man turned to face the one that had spoken. Grey eyes met blue ones. "Did you know that you smell of fox?"

All the Narutos growled a bit. "Don't play games with me; I want to know who you are."

The man chuckled. "You can call me Yuzuru, and who might you be? Or should I just call you fox?"

"My name's Naruto, I'm a ninja from hidden leaf. I've come here to track down a killer. Would you happen to know anything about that?"

"A killer?" Yuzuru teased. "Who has this killer been killing?"

"The locals, old men, women," Naruto made a face of distaste. "Even children. He's been tearing them apart and even eating them. Would you know about that?"

"Oh I know about killing, I kill pigs and rabbits and sometimes when I'm hungry I eat what I kill. There's no meat as tender or sweet as young rabbit."

"Pigs and rabbits? Have you killed any people?"

Yuzuru laughed. "People? I haven't met any people in a long time. You're the first since I ran away from the place I used to be in."

Naruto frowned, what was wrong with this guy? "And where was that?"

"It was a cage, far from here."

"You were in prison?"

Yuzuru smiled at him. "Ever been caged? I was in a place with no light, they kept me chained and in the dark. A terrible place, it's a wonder I didn't go mad."

This was not getting him anywhere. "I can sense your chakra; you're a ninja aren't you? Have you been the one murdering the locals?"

"Murder?" He laughed. "I already told you, I know about killing, but killing's not eh same as murdering. You can't call what I do to the pigs and rabbits murder."

"All right I've heard enough. You're coming with me. I'll give you once chance to surrender and come quietly. Otherwise I'll take you by force."

That was when the strangest part of the bizarre encounter happened. Yuzuru raised his hands up above his head. "O.k."

When his clones grabbed a hold of him he did not try to resist or escape.

Yuzuru was sitting cross legged in the little cell with nothing on but some shorts. His wrists and ankles were manacled and his arms were bound by heavy chain. He sat there listening to Amida and Naruto talk.

"So this is our killer?" Amida was staring at the man. What he found most interesting was a black ink tattoo on the man's chest; it was in the shape of an animal.

"Well he didn't confess or anything, but he's a ninja hiding in the woods, and I don't think he's completely sane. So my bet is he's the one."

"Good enough for me, we'll have his trial tomorrow."

"Trial?" Yuzuru laughed.

"Aye, a trial," Amida said. "And if were you I wouldn't be laughing. If your found guilty you'll get your head chopped off. After the things you've done that's too good for you."

Yuzuru looked at him without any hint of fear. "You're the one who's guilty."

Amida stiffened. "Aye, and what the hell am I guilty of?"

"You're guilty of thinking you're something that you're not. You think you're a person don't you? That you're important," he nodded to Naruto. "That one, the fox, he's a person, his life means something. You and the rest? You're just animals, just pigs and rabbits."

"You should watch your mouth," Naruto warned. "Anyone who kills for no reason, and anyone who would become a cannibal is an animal in my book."

Yuzuru looked at him with his cold grey eyes. "Cannibals eat their own. I'm a wolf; I have nothing to do with them. You should be the same fox."

"My name is Naruto and I would **never** see people that way! Anyone who could see other human beings as something less than human is just plain sick!"

"You don't understand." Yuzuru frowned and refused to say anything more.

"Thank you for all your help," Amida said. "Honestly I never thought you'd find him quick as you did." He glanced back at the prisoner who was still just sitting there in his cell. "Are you sure it'll be safe?"

"Yeah," Naruto nodded. "Even if he's real strong we won't be able to burst that chain, and so long as his arms are bound he can't make hand signs to use a jutsu. And I'll stay here to guard him."

"Thank you, we are all in your debt. There's a bed in the room in back where I sleep. Why don't you get some rest." He paused. "You will stay to guard him during the trial, right?"

"Sure, I'll stay until the job is done."

Hearing that filled Amida with a sense of relief.

While Naruto slept in the back room Amida lay out in his chair and slowly drifted off to sleep. Yuzuru watched him as he closed his eyes and then began to snore. Slowly and silently and rose to his feet. He grunted in pain as he began the transformation.

The tattoo on his chest pulsed with life and its ink spread out to cover his body. As the curse seal activated his body expanded and he grew. His mouth pushed out becoming a snout as his teeth grew and sharpened into fangs. His hands turned into claws as all his muscled hardened and grew. The chain bit against him and for a moment he had trouble breathing, then all at once they gave with a loud, 'snap.'

The sound of the chains breaking and spilling to the floor woke Amida with a start. He opened his eyes and cried out.

Standing in the cell with a monstrous grin was a hulking wolf like beast.

"Little pig, little pig, let me in," Yuzuru growled. With one hand he tore the iron door off its hinges.

In the back room Naruto heard something and came awake. He was just climbing out of bed when he heard Amida start to scream.

A bloody mistake

Naruto came out into the main room just in time to see blood splash onto the wall and floor in front of him. There was Amida making a choking sound, his hands grabbing at his ripped open throat. The Sheriff looked at Naruto with an expression of pure horror, then spilled over and fell. And standing there was a now a wolflike Yuzuru. As Naruto watched he brought his blood covered fingers to his snout and leisurely licked them clean.

" **RASENGAN!!**" In his fury Naruto instantly created a fully formed rasengan without the help of a clone. With a wordless howl he launched himself at the monster determined to blow a hole in his chest.

Yuzuru was faster. The same clawed hand that had ripped open Amida's throat caught Naruto by the wrist before he could hit him. "Yes!!" Yuzuru howled in sheer joy. "That's it! Let the animal come out!" Holding Naruto's wrist in an iron vice he swung him around and with monstrous strength threw him right through the wall.

Naruto went flying fifty feet before hitting the ground and rolling another thirty. The sound of this commotion brought startled people out of their homes.

"What's going on?"

"What's happening?"

"Where's the sheriff?"

Their confused conversations halted when they heard a deep animalistic howl. Then as they watched there was a brown blur cutting through them and blood spraying into the air as people began to scream and fall.

Feeling a little stunned Naruto looked up at all the noise. People were screaming and running back into their homes. There were already several bodies on the ground. As he watched Yuzuru tore some little grandmother's head from her shoulders.

"Stop! What the hell are you doing?!" He swiftly ran through some hand signs. " **Kage Bushin no Jutsu.**" Two hundred clones came into existence with a large puff of smoke. As one they charged straight in to take on the monstrous wolf.

Yuzuru was fast and his claws and teeth tore into a dozen clones dispelling them. But many others were able to get a hold of him and hold him in place as the original (again) created a rasengan without help of a clone.

"What the hell were you doing?! Why did you attack these people? They were no threat to you! Why did you kill them?" Naruto screamed furiously. The carnage around this place sickened him. He'd seen bodies before. During the battle in Konoha he'd created his share. But he'd killed enemy ninja who were attacking his home. He'd killed with a purpose. He counted six bodies out here; with Amida there would be seven, bodies of people who couldn't possibly have been any kind of threat.

Yuzuru stopped struggling as a mass of clones held him motionless. He pulled back the flesh about his long snout and sent Naruto a wicked animal smile. "Why do you care?"

"Why?! Because these people were innocent! They weren't ninja like us they were just ordinary civilians and there was no reason to kill them!"

Yuzuru put his head back and let loose a wolfish howl that descended into mad laughter. "You don't get it do you? Them, they're **nothing!** Do you want to know what they are? They're lowly pigs taking up space, breathing air and eating food and pouring out shit until they're pointless little lives are over. Do you think they matter? Kill every last one you see and there will still be a billion more! **We**

are the only ones who matter! We have power! We have strength! We were born predators, wolves and foxes that were made to prey on all the lesser creatures! Our lives have meaning, them, they were put here just to satisfy our wants."

"You're insane," Naruto spat. "Only someone insane could look at another human being and think that way!"

"That's nature," Yuzuru returned. "What you think a wolf feels any sort of sympathy for the rabbit he's tearing apart?"

"You're not a wolf no matter what you look like now and these people weren't rabbits! We're all human! We're all the same!"

Yuzuru spat in his direction. "You think we're the same as *them* ? Now who's insane?"

"I'm going to kill you!" Having had enough he ran at his target.

Yuzuru simply laughed. Despite having a mass of clones holding him he moved dodging to the right. Naruto's rasengan impaled a couple of his clones dispelling them but missing his target completely.

Yuzuru savagely threw off the clones causing them to vanish as he either ripped them with his claws or cased them to hit the ground with enough force to break them. He wound up landing on his feet free and clear. He turned to again face Naruto. He waved his clawed fingers in a taunting, 'come on' motion. "Stop holding back. I can smell the power inside of you. Let the animal out and show me that power!"

"You want me to let it out?" Naruto asked in a low growl. "Fine, I'll show you what a *real* monster looks like." Once before, in wave country, he'd given completely into rage. He'd thought Sasuke was dead, and in that moment of despair he'd let the thing inside him take control, at least a little. Now, surrounded by the bodies of innocent people he'd come here to protect he again let it out.

His eyes became red and slitted, his scars thickened and his own hands became claws. Out of his body red chakra flowed and coalesced around him. A red chakra cloak formed in the shape of a fox with a single tail swinging about. Then he *moved*.

Yuzuru saw him cover the thirty yards between them in the blink of an eye. And then he felt a fist slam into his side with such violent force he was sent flying as he felt his ribs break.

"How's this?!" Naruto screamed.

Yuzuru smashed to the ground and cried out in sudden pain. Before he could get to his feet Naruto was on him. He saw and felt his hand surrounded by the red chakra ripping into his belly and up into his chest. He saw his own guts getting ripped out.

Yuzuru howled at the maddening pain and fought back desperately. His claws could not get through the red chakra cloak. No matter what he did he could not hit Naruto. Naruto's fists came down snapping bones and smashing body parts. His snout was flattened and he felt blood filling his mouth.

He wasn't retying to fight anymore he was just trying to crawl away, but Naruto wouldn't let him go. Yuzuru tried to surrender, tried to plead for mercy, but nothing but a garble came out. Looking up into Naruto's face he knew it would be useless anyway, the same way he'd ignored all the pleas from the pigs he'd killed.

As he was being beaten to death Yuzuru felt a slight bit of satisfaction looking up into those inhuman red eyes. *I helped him bring the animal out, now he understands*. Those were his last coherent thoughts as Naruto beat him to death.

The next morning as the residents of Tsuyama came timidly out of hiding Naruto was not there to greet them. Along with the seven bodies of their sheriff and neighbors they found one other that was no longer recognizable. It was just a mass of blood and flesh

smearred into the ground. On the door of the jail they found a hastily written note informing them their killer was dead and that no payment would be required of them.

Sarutobi listened patiently as Naruto gave an oral report of what had happened on the mission. Much of it worried him. For the second time now Naruto had temporarily lost control and released some of the Kyuubi's power. That in itself was bad. But what was even worse was the fact Naruto had lost complete control of himself while killing this rogue ninja. Ninja were not berserkers. They were not permitted to just give into their blood lusts and go wild. Ninja were the ultimate example of controlled violence. Their entire philosophy was based on the basic principle that they must always be in control of their actions and emotions. There was never any reason to lose control of oneself. *I will need to speak to Itachi about this. If anyone can help teach him self discipline it would be him.* For any ninja to lose control of himself would be bad, but for Naruto it had the potential to be catastrophic.

When Naruto wrapped up his report Sarutobi nodded. "I think the events of your mission will need to remain an S-rank secret."

Naruto nodded immediately. "Yes Hokage-sama."

"I am curious about something Naruto, why did you cancel the payment? You succeeded in your mission after all."

Naruto looked at him in disbelief. "Are you kidding old man? I let Amida and those other people all get killed because I relaxed! Their deaths are my fault! And afterwards... Everything was a total failure."

"No," the Hokage said with shake of the head. "You did exercise poor judgment, but your mission was to kill or capture a killer, and that you did. The mission was a success."

"A success? But what about the people who died because of me?"

"Naruto, I am not going to minimize the mistakes you made."
Sarutobi said grimly. "When this Yuzuru was captured *you* should have guarded him rather than allowing the local sheriff to do so. No matter how passively he submitted or how secure he seemed to be, normal guards are never sufficient for ninja prisoners."

"Yes Hokage-sama," he mumbled.

"However," Sarutobi pressed on. "You cannot feel responsible for the deaths caused following his escape."

"But..."

"Naruto, in our line of work innocent people are always going to die." Sarutobi told him. "That is an absolute truth that you can't change. It is also true that no matter what happens you are human and are going to make mistakes, and sometimes these mistakes are going to lead to the deaths of others. *I* have made many choices that I came to regret, choice that led to needless death suffering." *Orochimaru*. "You must recognize your mistakes and learn from them, but you mustn't blame yourself for the deaths. If you do Naruto you will not be able to continue to function as a ninja. We ninja are always surrounded by violent death. We must harden ourselves to it, even when we feel we are the cause, or before long you will not be able to continue. Learn from the mistakes you made Naruto, but don't blame yourself."

Naruto slowly nodded. "I understand."

"Good, go home now, you have the remainder of the day free."

When Naruto left Sarutobi thought on some of the details of the missing nin. He'd apparently had a seal of some sort and been able to use it to greatly change his form and increase his power. *It sounds like the seal that Orochimaru used, but those were all destroyed with his death. How could one of his seals still be functioning?*

Along with the report Naruto had returned one interesting piece of evidence that had been taken from Yuzuru at the time of his original arrest.

It was a Rain hitai-ite with a deep scratch running down the middle of it.

Naruto had returned home unsure what he was going to do with the rest of the day when there was a knock at the door. When he answered it there was the most beautiful girl in the whole world smiling at him.

"Naruto-kun! I was hoping you were home!" Hinata gave him a huge embrace. "I just got back with Lady Tsunade, the conference was really interesting and I learned about a lot of new techniques and drugs. Have you eaten yet? If not how about I make us something and I can tell you about my trip!" Hinata looked up at her boyfriend. He was just staring at her with an odd look on his face. He wasn't usually this quiet. "Is something wrong Naruto-kun?"

"No," he said with a sudden smile. "Not anymore." He leaned down and gave his darling a kiss welcoming her back home.

Godfather

Though it was October it was unusually warm. Having done a lot of running earlier Naruto was drenched in sweat. He was currently standing out under the sun in the yard behind his sensei's home. Itachi patiently looked at his watch. At long last he nodded his head. "Spit it out."

Naruto promptly spat out the mouthful of water he'd been holding as he'd run around the compound building up a thirst. "What the hell was the point of that?" Naruto demanded. He pulled out his canteen so that he could *finally* have a drink.

"It was an exercise to teach you self discipline," Itachi informed him. "Given your recent events the Hokage asked me to concentrate on this area with you."

Memories of Tsuyama flashed through his mind. It had been weeks since then, but he was still bothered by his mistakes and by the way he had lost control. "I'm tired of training all the time, when can I go on another mission?" He hadn't left the village since coming back.

"The Hokage has decided that you will not be assigned another mission until I believe you are ready for one."

"That's not fair! I'm a Chunin and I've *led* missions before. Why am I suddenly being grounded? Is it because of what's inside me?"

"Yes," Itachi answered. "You are not an ordinary Chunin Naruto. Your failings on your last mission would have been a concern for a regular Chunin, but for you they are a major issue and need to be dealt with."

"That's not fair!" Naruto shouted. "Why do I have to be singled out just for something that wasn't my fault?!"

Itachi stood there eyeing him calmly. "You seem a bit more emotional today than usual."

Naruto looked down feeling embarrassed. Here was Itachi trying to teach himself discipline and control and he was *yelling* at him.

"Sorry," he muttered. "But what do you expect? Tomorrow is October tenth."

"Is there something special about October tenth?" A woman's voice called.

Both of them turned to see Mina standing on the back porch. Her belly was very big, she was due soon.

"It's my birthday," Naruto said quietly. "I'll be fourteen. It's also the anniversary of the Kyuubi's attack on the village."

Mina smiled at him. "Well happy birthday! Are you having a party?"

"No! I'll just come here and train. People are a lot more accepting of me than they used to be but that doesn't mean I want to be seen out in public tomorrow."

"Why not?" Mina asked.

"The village holds a large celebration each October tenth to mark the anniversary of the Yondaime's victory over the Kyuubi." Itachi explained in his usual detached manner. "Given who Naruto is many of the villagers took the occasion to release some of their frustrations upon him."

"In other words they would beat the crap out of me and then try and kill me," said Naruto in a low tone.

"Oh, I see." Mina replied feeling embarrassed.

"I'd like to think that most people wouldn't want to do that now, but I don't really want to take any chances." He looked at Itachi. "If it's all

right, could I stay here tomorrow night? I'd rather not be in my house if that's o.k."

"Certainly you can stay," Itachi said. "You are more than welcome."

"Thank you Itachi-sensei."

"You know Naruto it is true that because of who you are you receive special treatment." Itachi said.

"Don't remind me," he grumbled.

"But not all of that has been negative has it? Because of who you are you have had free access to the Hokage since childhood, you have been given special instructors including a Sannin, and of course you have been given the opportunity to become the next Hokage."

Naruto did a double take. "Wait! You know about that?"

Itachi nodded. "The Hokage told me of his offer to you following our initial meeting and test. He also told me the terms of your agreement with Hiashi about Hinata's hand in marriage."

"I think that's so unbelievably romantic Naruto!" Mina called out. "Nothing melts a girl's heart like knowing a man will put himself in danger for her." She looked adoringly at Itachi.

"So you know about that too? I thought all this was supposed to be secret!"

"It is," Itachi confirmed. "But the Hokage decided to take me into his confidence when he assigned me to be your sensei. And I do not keep secrets from my wife. Rest assured your secrets will remain safe with us."

Mina put a finger over her lips and gave Naruto a wink.

When Naruto was done for the day and departed Mina went over to her husband. "All right, I need you to meet with the Hokage and get permission for a couple people to come here tomorrow, and while you're at it see if you can invite him too."

Itachi gave his wife a quizzical look. "Now what are you up to?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Isn't it obvious? I'm planning his birthday party."

Walking back home in disguise he could see the decorations and banners being hung up in the streets for tomorrows festival. Seeing them made him feel glum. They were reminders of his past and of the fact that no matter how hard he tried some things were never going to change.

He was a ninja now and if he really wanted to it would be easy to henge into someone and go out and celebrate with the crowds. But what would be the point? What would he be celebrating exactly? The event that had ruined his life and made him miserable and alone all those years? He could still remember being a little kid at the orphanage wanting to go out and celebrate with all the other children. He could still remember crying when the old man told him he couldn't go. He also remembered being a little older, when he'd first been given his apartment and allowed to live on his own. He'd finally gone to the festival.

And spent three days in intensive care afterwards.

He didn't understand of course, the reason for all that hate. It was always there, reflected in the way people looked at him. But for some reason it was a hundred times worse on October tenth. It was his birthday. All he wanted was to go out and have fun. Instead it became the worst day of the year. A day for hiding and praying everyone would forget about him. For him October tenth was anything but a day of celebration.

When he got home all the lights were off. Hinata was out of the village on a C-rank. She'd probably be back tomorrow. He'd already told her he didn't want to celebrate his birthday. He just wanted to disappear for that one day. Without Hinata the house seemed empty and lifeless. He had a cup of instant ramen and then headed off to bed.

"This is going to be a mistake," Itachi said.

"It'll be fine," Mina cooed happily. "Now can you hand me the streamers Itachi-kun?"

Following his usual morning workout with Fukasaku-sensei Naruto disguised himself and headed to the tea house and the secret passageway to the Uchiha compound. When he came out Itachi was waiting there for him.

"Hello Itachi-sensei, I'm ready to train!"

Itachi stood there and looked down at him with a dire expression.

"Aw crap, what are you going to do to me today? Make me stand on a tight rope over a pit of sharpened stakes?"

"That will be next week."

"Huh?"

Itachi took a deep breath and bowed to his student. "I want to apologize to you for what is about to happen. It was not my intention, but I was not strong enough to resist my wife."

"Wait a second, *Mina* decided my training today? But she's not even a ninja."

Itachi actually had a very tiny smirk touch his lips. "Women have a power all their own Naruto, one that is far harder to resist than mere ninjutsu or genjutsu."

Naruto thought immediately of Hinata. "Yeah, that's true."

"Mina has set the itinerary for today; you will have to make the best of it. Come along."

Itachi led him back to the house that he and his wife lived in. Naruto was wracking his brains trying to guess what sort of training could possibly make Uchiha Itachi of all people look unnerved.

Itachi halted on the porch and pointed to his front door. "Go inside." He instructed.

Nodding Naruto steeled himself. "Right." He reached out and opened the door.

" Surprise!"

Naruto blinked to see Mina, Sarutobi, Tsunade, and Hinata all standing there. Behind them was a large banner hanging from the ceiling, 'Happy Fourteenth Birthday Naruto!' As soon as the initial greeting was over Hinata ran up to him and glomped on planting a welcoming kiss on his lips.

"Happy birthday Naruto-kun!"

"Wha?" he looked around feeling a bit dazed. "Hinata-chan, what's going on?"

"The Hokage told me about Itachi being your sensei and gave me special permission to come here." Hinata told him.

"I've been the one taking care of Mina through her pregnancy so I've come here before," Tsunade said.

Naruto looked at Sarutobi. "What's going on here old man?"

"Itachi came to me yesterday with a special request from his wife. She wanted to throw you a birthday party; I decided it was a reasonable request given what your previous birthdays have been like."

Naruto looked at the people gathered around him. "Didn't you tell me that secret information had to be given out on a need to know basis?"

"Well obviously everyone here needed to know to celebrate your birthday." Mina said. "Now get ready to blow out your candles."

This was the very first time in his life Naruto had ever gotten to truly celebrate his birthday. Needless to say it had some interesting moments.

Tsunade was staring at her half filled cup and frowning.

"Is something wrong?" Mina asked.

"This punch... it tastes funny."

Worriedly Mina took the ladle and filled a cup and tasted. "I think it tastes fine, it's not like it's spiked or anything."

"That's the problem," Tsunade realized.

"What?"

"It's not spiked." She produced a silver flask and tried to fix it.

Following cake and non alcoholic drink Mina came out with an armful of board games. "Let's play a party game!" She announced with her usual zeal. "What should we play first?"

"Twister," Naruto suggested and looked at Hinata.

She blushed. "Uhm, how about Monopoly?"

"Strip poker!" Tsunade shouted.

Everyone else turned to look at her.

"What?" She said defensively. "It's a great party game! Me and my old teammates played it all the time."

"Well that explains a lot," Naruto muttered.

"Here's your birthday present Naruto-kun, I hope you like it." She nervously handed him a wrapped package. They were sitting on the couch.

Taking it Naruto eagerly tore it open. Inside was a ninja coat and pants that were mostly black but with a thick stripe of dark orange along the side.

"I know how much you like orange," she explained. "I thought you could wear this and it would be much less noticeable, especially with your Chunin vest on."

He had a huge smile and he grabbed a hold of her and gave her a huge hug. "Thanks Hinata-chan I love it! This is what I'll wear from now on!"

"Really?"

He nodded his head up and down. "Yeah, thank Hinata-chan, you really are the best." He leaned in and gave his girlfriend a kiss.

He'd meant it to just be a quick, 'thank you' kiss, but it lingered. Hinata leaned against him and he pulled her closer and continued to kiss those soft, soft lips.

Splat.

The odd sound of water splashing on carpet made them stop and look up.

Mina was standing there staring down at the puddle at her feet. "Ah, what just happened?"

Tsunade came over to her and took her by the arm. "Your water broke, you're going into labor."

"What?" Naruto was on his feet instantly. "We have to get her to the hospital."

"There's no need Naruto," Itachi said calmly. "No one knows about Mina's existence or the fact a new Uchiha is about to be born. This must remain a secret."

"And since there are two medic nins right here, there's no problem." Tsunade said. She had not had anything from her silver flask and so she was completely sober. "Come on Hinata, you'll assist me."

"Right sensei," she got up.

Naruto gawked at her. "Hinata-chan you're going to help deliver a baby?"

"Well of course, I am a medic nin after all."

Together she, Tsunade, Mina and Itachi went into the bedroom. (Mina loudly insisted she wanted him there,)

Sarutobi stood there smiling. "A new life enters the village."

Naruto looked at him. "How can you be so calm right now?"

Sarutobi looked at Naruto who was clearly on edge. "Why are you nervous? She is with Tsunade and Hinata and there is no reason to expect anything but a normal birth. You've seen battle and life and death combat why does this have you so worried?"

"I... I don't know," he admitted. "I guess because when I'm in battle I have some control of what happens. But right now..."

"Right now you can do nothing but await the outcome." Sarutobi nodded understanding. "You will have to grow used to it I'm afraid. This is often what it is like as Hokage. You set things in motion and hope for the best. Then you can only wait."

"How do you stand it old man?"

"You learn to accept that you cannot control everything Naruto," Sarutobi said. "You do everything that you can, but in the end you must accept that no one man can do everything, not even a Hokage. You must learn to trust others, and at times to simply trust in fate."

"And what do you do if things go wrong?" Naruto asked quietly.

"You mourn and then you accept. The world works the way it does, not the way we would like it to. The rain falls on the just and unjust alike. You cannot take responsibility for *everything*."

Naruto slowly nodded. "I guess."

"Do what you can. Learn from your mistakes. And understand there will always be limits."

"Yeah," Naruto said. "But I still plan to be the greatest Hokage ever and make this world a better place."

Sarutobi nodded. "I have faith that you will Naruto."

Four hours later a healthy baby boy was born. Outside the festival fireworks were going off. It was almost as if they were celebrating the birth of this child.

"Do you want to hold him?" Hinata asked.

"Can I?"

"Of course you can Naruto," a weary Mina said. "After all, he is your namesake."

"Uchiha Naruto," Itachi said. "A fine and worthy name."

"You know since he's named for you that means you're his godfather brat. I hope you're up for the responsibility." Tsunade said with a smirk.

"Are you serious? I'm his godfather?"

"Only if you wish to be," Itachi said. "It is tradition that if a child is named for you, you become a godparent. But that is your choice."

"Then... then I'll be his godfather," Naruto said with total solemn conviction. "I want to help protect him as he grows up."

Sarutobi nodded his silent approval as did Itachi and Mina.

"Here Naruto," Hinata carefully handed the baby over to him. "You need to support his head as you hold him."

Naruto took the newborn and held him as Hinata instructed. The child continued to sleep peacefully.

Hinata looked at him dreamily. "You're a natural Naruto-kun; you'll be a great father some day."

Naruto looked at her. "And I know you'll be a really great mom Hinata-chan."

She blushed a bit and moved closer to him as he held the baby.

"You know," Tsunade said innocently. "The two of you look like the child's parents at the moment."

Mina smiled. "They're a little young yet but they do look like a perfect little family don't they?"

Naruto and Hinata both blushed a bit, but they shared a comfortable warm feeling at the thought. Naruto also thought about the wish he'd made as he'd blown out his candles.

To always be with Hinata.

Begin Operation Legacy

One Year Later

It was October tenth again and Naruto was now 15. Mina had thrown him another birthday party. Actually the party had been for him and her son. The guest list had been the same, but as no one was born this time around the party had not been quite as memorable as the last one.

He and Hinata snuck out while everyone was focused on the other Naruto. They were currently snuggled together on the roof of one of the many abandoned buildings in the Uchiha compound. They were making out like... well like a couple teenagers. Hinata was dressed in her usual black pants and slightly snug black shirt. The bulky jacket of her academy days was a distant memory. Physically her body had started to really mature, especially her chest. This had not gone unnoticed by the young men of the village. With her physical beauty, friendly outgoing nature, great skills as a medic nin, and her position as the Hyuuga heiress she was the leading beauty of the village. She surpassed even the ravishing Ino and left plain old Sakura far behind. Sadly for all the young men of Konoha Hinata's heart was already taken.

Naruto had his hand inside her shirt slowly stroking her bra and the breast hidden just beneath. Even with their tongues sliding into each other's mouths she still gave a little moan. He knew she would make him stop soon; this was as far as she was willing to let him go. Getting to be alone together so often they had slowly grown more intimate. Naruto longed to go even further but Hinata never let him go past the fondling stage. And even if she had been willing he had made that promise to Hiashi. As he kissed her and touched her it occurred to him this was the girl he'd once dismissed as a quiet weirdo. *Damn I really was a complete idiot back then.*

"Naruto stop," as he'd known would happen she took his hand away and pulled her shirt back down over her bra.

"Aw come on Hinata-chan, it's my birthday. Can't we go a little further?"

She gave her boyfriend a knowing smile. "I've already let you go a little further than usual, we can't do more."

Why not? He decided to argue, just going this far was amazing and he loved that Hinata was a good girl. She was exactly her sort of woman any man should want to marry. "O.k. I guess," he slid his arms around her and held her close as he lay back down in the roof. "The fireworks should be starting soon."

She pressed herself against him. He'd removed his vest to let her get as close as possible. "Are you worried about the Jonin test tomorrow?"

"Nope," he said with a confident smile. "I was able to beat Itachi so there's no way I'm not passing, no matter what the test is like." He'd pleaded with the old man, Kakashi, Ebisu, and every other Jonin he knew but no one would reveal what the test was.

"You really beat Itachi?"

One Month Earlier

Itachi moved silently through the shadows of the Uchiha compound. For the past three hours he and Naruto had been having their own little game of hide and seek. It was also a variation of the bell test. Each of them carried a single bell on their belt. The nature of the exercise was simple; use your stealth skills to take the bell from your opponent. Over the past year Naruto had greatly improved his chakra control as well as his stealth abilities. He'd actually become a very worthy adversary and a genuine challenge. But he was still no match for the master.

Itachi had found Naruto's hiding place. He's masked his presence and chakra signature well but Itachi had managed to pick up just the faintest trace from him. Moving with slow and practiced care within the shadows he approached Naruto from behind. With one perfectly timed move he took the bell cleanly from Naruto's belt, ending the night's test.

"Well done Naruto, your skill is excellent, but the test is now over."

Naruto slowly stood up and grinned. "It was over an hour ago I was waiting for you to notice." He pointed to the bell on Itachi's belt. The bell there instantly vanished in a puff of smoke. The bell in his hand along with Naruto also vanished in smoke.

"Your stupidity has just killed you," Naruto's voice whispered in Itachi's ear.

Itachi turned about to see his student standing there grinning and holding a bell. *He took my bell and got right behind me without my ever sensing him.* "Very well done Naruto," Itachi gave him a respectful nod of his head. "I think you have learned everything I can teach you."

"Yeah I did, so no matter what this test is I'll beat it."

Hinata was quiet for a moment. "Naruto, how are you doing with the Hiraishin?"

He looked at her and his confident grin remained firmly in place. "I'm close, I'm sure I'll get there soon."

"Naruto," she said cautiously. "You've been saying that for months now. You have one year until my father's deadline. What if..."

"Hinata-chan," He leaned in close and brought his mouth to hers. "I **will** master the Hiraishin no Jutsu before I turn sixteen. I have absolutely no doubt about it, none."

She looked into his sky blue eyes. Ever since she'd been a timid little girl just looking at him had been enough to give her courage. Being with him had completely changed her life. Her shyness, her insecurities were a thing of the past. Naruto thought she was special and he loved her, how could she possibly doubt herself when he believed in her? But the thought of losing him and of his having that horrible seal implanted onto his forehead filled her with dread. "How can you be so sure Naruto-kun?"

"Because if you want something with all your heart and you go after it with everything you've got you can make anything happen!" If confidence alone could make it possible then he would succeed without any doubt at all. "I love you with all my heart Hinata-chan. I **will** learn the Hiraishin, I **will** become Hokage, and I **will** make you my wife and love you forever. Don't doubt it for even a second."

"Naruto-kun," she whispered.

As they kissed the fireworks filled the night sky.

They didn't notice.

A dozen rain ninja lay defeated and unconscious around him.

"You didn't kill any of them," Tobi / Madara noted impressed. To defeat an enemy without killing him was the height of skill.

Sasuke stood there in his black robe with red clouds. His face was hidden beneath a swirling black mask that was similar to Tobi's except for its black color. "They're not the ones I want to kill. I'm sick of training. When do I get what you promised me master?"

"Soon," Madara said comfortingly "Everything is about to begin. Soon we will both have our revenge."

Karin was working late at the research base when she heard screams. Screams were hardly out of the ordinary in this place. But these screams weren't coming from the labs they seemed to be coming from the living quarters. *Dear kami have some of the test subjects broken free?* That hadn't happened in more than a year, not since that animal Yuzuru escaped after slaughtering half the research staff.

After that security had been greatly heightened. Among other things she'd had cameras installed throughout the facility. She could access their pictures from right here in her lab. Going to a console she brought the images up. What she saw made her gasp. Her people, her researchers were being slaughtered in their beds or in the halls as they tried to run. But that wasn't the worst of what she was seeing. It wasn't any of the test subjects who were murdering her people.

It was the various incarnations of Pein.

He seemed to somehow know she was watching him. His main body turned to one of the cameras and spoke. "I am sorry about this Karin. You and your team did a marvelous job and I am truly grateful. But now that your work is done you are much too dangerous to risk having someone capture you. I am afraid you and the other scientists here are now expendable. Please remain where you are and wait. I will be there in less than a minute. I promise to make your death quick and painless." With that he began walking towards the lab where she was.

"Oh fuck!" She needed to get out. She could sense his chakra and he really would be there in less than a minute. Before she took off in her lab coat though she ran over to a computer and popped out a disk and put it in a case. *I'll need this to bargain with!* She then ran to a secret door she'd had installed along with the cameras and other measures.

Pein arrived at lab 01 to find the door unlocked. When he entered he found the place deserted. He calmly shut his eyes and reached out with his senses to try and find her. To his great annoyance there seemed to be no trace of her anywhere. "This could be a problem." With a thought one of his incarnations summoned a tracking animal and set out to find the wayward scientist.

"A bell test?!" Naruto shouted. "Are you kidding me?" These bell tests were turning into the bane of his existence.

"Yosh!" an excited Gai cried out. His near fatal injuries long since healed. "That is the fire of youth every Jonin needs! Don't you agree my eternal rival?"

Kakashi looked up from his book. "Sorry, did you say something?"

As Gai began to sputter about Kakashi and his hip attitude Asuma grinned and took another drag on his cigarette. "Don't worry Naruto it shouldn't be that bad. Well, at least it won't be fatal."

"Fatal?"

"He's teasing you Naruto," Kakashi said. Each of the elite Jonin had a single bell tied to his belt. Naruto had been given one as well. "You probably won't even be hurt... much."

"You know I'm starting to remember why I never liked you much as a sensei," Naruto said in an annoyed tone.

Sarutobi grinned at the banter between them. "The test is simple Naruto," the Hokage explained. "You will go into training ground twelve and remain there for three hours. Kakashi, Gai, and Asuma will try to track you down and take your bell. To pass the test you must keep your bell for the full three hours. You need not only remain on the defensive. You can remove each of them from the exam by, 'killing' them and taking their bells. Obviously if you manage to take all three bells you pass the test immediately."

Naruto smiled wickedly. For some reason seeing that made Kakashi a bit nervous. "Can I use any jutsus I want?"

"Certainly, but do keep in mind these are your fellow Leaf nin so try to avoid lethal force. Now the test will begin in five minutes so I suggest you find a hiding spot."

"Right!" Naruto said cheerfully and jogged into the training ground. He had no worries about success. If he could successfully hide from Itachi no one else would be able to track him down, not even Kakashi with his nin dogs. No, he had something else in mind.

"Why do I have a bad feeling about this?" Kakashi muttered.

Five minutes later the three Jonin entered the training ground.

They went in as a group and were about to split up when they heard a loud voice cry out.

" Kage Bushin no Jutsu."

The entire training ground seemed to be enveloped with smoke. When it cleared the three Jonin were surrounded by two thousand shadow clones. **"Don't worry!"** They all said at once. **" I probably won't hurt you... much."**

"Yosh!! Now this is a challenge!" Gai cried out in genuine enthusiasm.

The other two looked at him as though he were insane.

With a roar the kage bushins charged.

Ten minutes later Konoha's newest Jonin came tramping out whistling a jaunty tune. "Here you are," he handed the Hokage three bells.

Sarutobi looked back at the training ground. "This is a new record Naruto; you didn't injure them did you?"

"Not seriously," Naruto said. He thought of Kakashi and grinned. "I happen to know for a fact that the Thousand Years of Death no Jutsu is non lethal."

He headed home wondering how far Hinata would let him get as they celebrated his promotion.

"Do you understand your mission?" Pein said to the two astral images.

"You need us to track down and kill this woman for you," Sasori growled.

"Sounds like fun, yeah!" Deidara said.

"Do not take this lightly," Pein said stern and uncompromising. "She is no warrior, but she is very skilled at self preservation, and what she knows could bring us ruin. Make certain she dies with her secrets intact."

"Understood," Sasori nodded his bulky neck.

The two images vanished.

"This could be a real problem," Konan offered. "Do you want to delay things until she has been dealt with?"

"No, this day has been delayed long enough. Today we will begin to bring the world peace, the only way possible, with the sword. We will conquer the world and impose peace upon them from above. Let us begin Operation Legacy."

He stepped out from the hidden room at the very top of his sacred, 'temple.' Gathered below him were a thousand ninja. Every one of

them with a Rain hitai-ite with a scratch through it. Every one of them with a curse seal; the legacy of Orochimaru's genius.

"The great and holy day is upon us!" He cried out. "In the name of your living god go forth and conquer all who oppose me! Let us bring this world peace through fire and blood!"

And from down below he was answered by a thousand roars.

Thus began the Fourth Great Ninja war and Akatsuki's bid to conquer the world.

A confused situation

Two messenger hawks arrived within a couple of hours of each other. In the ninja world these specially trained hawks were the fastest way to deliver news across vast distances. They were reserved for emergencies and the most dire needs. Each hawk carried a coded message that had to be deciphered before it could be presented to the Hokage.

When Sarutobi read the message from the first hawk he literally could not believe it. "Are you sure this is the correct message? Could there have been a mistake made while deciphering it?"

The woman who had brought him the message bowed to him. "No, Hokage-sama, we checked twice before delivering it to you. The message you have is an accurate translation."

Sarutobi looked back down at it. He simply could not believe it. "Translate it again, just to be certain."

"Yes Hokage-sama!" The woman hurried out of his office.

Ten minutes later she returned with another translation of the coded message. It was the same word for word.

About an hour and a half later the second hawk arrived. This one had come from a different location. Reading the second message Sarutobi found it only *slightly* less unbelievable. Laying the two messages side by side he considered them. They'd been sent from locations hundreds of miles apart. Yet they shared some disturbing similarities. Clearly *something* was going on out there.

Pressing a button he called in one of his secretaries. "I want two patrols sent out immediately. Inform them they are to perform reconnaissance only; they are to avoid any contact with possible

enemy ninja. See that both teams are provided messenger birds. Also I need to schedule a meeting."

Naruto was not surprised when he got a message to come to the Tower and meet with the Hokage. No doubt the Hokage wanted to congratulate him properly on becoming a Jonin. He was a bit surprised when he was directed to a conference room rather than to the Hokage's office, but it wasn't a big deal. As he strolled down the corridor he hoped the old man also had a nice juicy A-rank mission waiting for him. He was eager to get out there and get a challenge. Over the past year he'd only gone on a total of ten missions. Most of his time had been devoted to studying the Hiraishin and training with Fukasaku and Itachi. The efforts had definitely been worthwhile! He was in outstanding physical condition, had mastered the sage fighting style, gained much improved chakra control, learned some self discipline and patience, and now knew all of Itachi's stealth and assassination techniques.

Still... he would have liked to have done some training with ero-sennin. But the old pervert was still nowhere to be found, he had yet to return to the village. Naruto was *really* hoping to see the pervert again soon. With only a year to go he could use a little help cracking the Hiraishin.

When he got to the conference room he strode in and loudly announced himself. "Hey old man, your newest and best Jonin is..."

This was when he noticed there were about fifty other people there. He also quickly saw that they included just about every Jonin and Council member in the village. He saw Kakashi, Gai, and Asuma all present. That must have meant their hospital stays had only been overnight. He noted that Kakashi was among the few people standing. Tsunade was there and sent him an amused grin. Hiashi was also present, after a quick glance he looked away, disinterested. Neji was there as well. He gave Naruto a hard glare before trying to pretend he didn't exist. He also spotted Tayuya, she waved. He was

surprised to spot her as she seemed the only one present who was not either a Council member or a Jonin, she was a Chunin.

"Thank you for coming Naruto," the Hokage greeted him politely. "Please take a seat; we will begin the meeting shortly."

Since there was an opening by Tayuya he sat next to her. He leaned over to whisper to her. "What's going on?"

"No fucking idea," she whispered back.

After only a few minutes the Hokage began the meeting and let them all know what was going on. "I have just received two messenger hawks with disturbing news. It seems that Ame has invaded both Tsuchi and Kusa."

That got a reaction. In the last war both Rain and Grass had been battlefields where the forces of Iwa and Konoha had fought. The Rain nin had been on Earth's side while Grass had been Leaf's ally.

"Excuse me Hokage-sama," Kakashi called out. "I believe you misspoke. I think what you meant to say was that Iwa had invaded Ame and Kuso."

But to everyone's surprise the Hokage shook his head. "No, I thought it was a mistake as well, but the cryptologists assure me that the messages both state that Rain is the aggressor."

"That is ridiculous," Danzo said loudly. "Rain is only a mid level power. They have, at most, a thousand ninja. They would be outnumbered at least five to one against Earth. I suppose they could fight Grass on equal terms, but they must know we have an alliance with Grass and would come to their aid."

Sarutobi nodded. "As a matter of fact a request for military intervention was part of the message from Grass." Sarutobi took a long puff from his pipe. "The message from Iwa had a similar request."

Now **that** got a reaction. Most of those present were old enough to have fought the rock nins during the last war and still harbored many resentments.

"Is that a joke?!" Nara Shikaku demanded. He and his old teammates were all veterans of the last war. "As if we'd ever help those Iwa bastards!"

"This can't possibly be a real request," Yamanka Inoichi said loudly.

"Clearly this must be some sort of trick or ruse," Hyuuga Hiashi pronounced.

"That is a very real possibility," Sarutobi admitted. "But there is more. Both messages mention being invaded by armies that seem to be comprised entirely of high level Jonin. They also mention that their enemies seem able to physically alter themselves gaining great physical power and chakra. The description is eerily similar to the effects of Orochimaru's curse seal."

This announcement produced confused mutters. Most of those present were not familiar with the effects of the curse seal. What worried them was the idea of a ninja army comprised *entirely* of Jonin. Konoha had roughly 2,500 ninja of all ranks and abilities. Of these only about 150 had attained the rank of Chunin while only 50 had reached Jonin. And even among this relatively small number only a handful (Kakashi, Jiraiya, Asuma...) were considered to be high level Jonin (or even higher ranked Sannin.) That meant that over 90 percent of all the ninja were Genin level. They were more than a match for any ordinary soldiers, but would be at a severe disadvantage going up against Jonin.

"Tayuya," Sarutobi turned to her as did most everyone else. "You were familiar with Orochimaru's seal. What is your opinion on all this?"

Despite all the eyes on her she stood up and spoke crisply and clearly. "I honestly don't see how it would be possible. My seal

disappeared with Orochimaru's death, just like all the other seals he'd made. To plant the seal on you he had to physically bite you, his own blood was a component of the seal. I don't know how it could be made without his blood. But there were researchers who studied the effects of the seal and who helped Orochimaru perfect it. I suppose it might be possible that someone figured out a way to duplicate it."

Sarutobi nodded his head sagely. "Naruto, about a year ago you went on a mission and faced an opponent who also appeared to use a seal. I would like you to describe that for us."

Naruto slowly stood up and licked his lips. "Ah, didn't you declare everything about that mission to be an S-rank secret?"

"Just for this meeting I will unseal the mission file. You do not have to reveal *everything* that occurred. Merely tell us the relevant information."

Fine, but the Kyuubi's chakra definitely isn't relevant then. Naruto gave a brief description of the mission and went into detail describing his opponent's seal, his physical transformation, and the incredible boost in physical strength, speed, and chakra he gained. Everyone listened with rapt attention, including Tayuya.

Having heard Naruto's recollection Sarutobi had a question for him. "How would you rate your opponent's power level compared to the Leaf ninja you know?"

"He was high Jonin," Naruto said with no hesitation. "I think he could have fought Kakashi one to one."

"I see, thank you Naruto," Naruto quickly sat back down. "So it would seem there is evidence that the rain ninja really do possess a curse seal that functions similar to Orochimaru's. Were they to give all their ninja this seal they might just be able to create an army composed entirely of Jonin."

Tayuya jumped to her feet. "Excuse me Hokage-sama but that is *not* possible."

Sarutobi looked at her. "Why do you say that?"

"Because of the curse seal's greatest flaw. It has a 90 percent lethality rate." Tayuya declared. "If they really did give all their ninja this seal they wouldn't have an army of a thousand curse seal ninja. They'd have a hundred, and they'd have nine hundred corpses."

"Yes, I recall Anko mentioning something similar following her conversation with Orochimaru during the exams prior to his attack. However," he said calmly. "We only know that to be true of Orochimaru's curse seal. This one, while similar, appears to be somewhat distinct. We cannot assume it has a similar lethality rate."

Tayuya paled a bit at the thought and slowly sat back down.

"Given our scant information it is impossible for us to know the full truth. I have dispatched scout teams to investigate the situations in both Earth and Grass. But in the meantime one thing is clear and without dispute, our ally Grass has been invaded and called on us for aid. The terms of our alliance leave us no choice but to support them, just as we did in the last war. Therefore I am ordering an army of five hundred ninja to be formed and dispatched to Grass as quickly as possible."

"What about Earth?" One of his ninja called out.

"We have no treaty with Iwa and no obligation to aid them. We will watch events in Earth country carefully for right now and act accordingly."

Heads nodded up and down, in general everyone approved of the Hokages' decisions. The rest of the meeting was taken up with forming the expeditionary force that would be going to Grass. Given the confused situation this army would have an inordinately high

proportion of Jonin in it. Including Kakashi, Asuma, Gai, Tsunade, and Naruto.

Naruto couldn't help but feel lucky. He'd made Jonin just in time to be tapped for the opening round of a brand new war.

Pein was traveling with the main army into Earth country. He'd sent 900 ninja here while allowing a much smaller force of just 100 to deal with Grass. He tried not to intervene directly in the operations too much. A god was much more frightening if he remained aloof and mysterious. In any case there really wasn't any need for much intervention. His forces had smashed the Rock army they'd faced, almost completely annihilating it. On the horizon he could see plumes of smoke rising into the sky. Those were all earth country villages and towns. He'd given strict orders. Any places that surrendered with no resistance would be shown his benevolent mercy. Any place that fought, even slightly, was to be exterminated and razed to the ground.

As he watched from a distance eight rock nin prisoners were being brought before one of his sub commanders. They had their hands bound and were forced to their knees before the rain officer. Again, Pein had given strict instructions on what he wanted done.

The Rain sub commander grimaced at the prisoners who were kneeling before him. "I'll make this quick," he said harshly. "We're not going to bother with prisoners; our Holy Emperor has no time to waste on them."

"Holy Emperor?" One of the Iwa nin questioned. He was rewarded with a kick to the ribs.

"That's right! Our living god has decided to restore the ancient title of Emperor, and since he is a god what else could he be but a Holy Emperor? We will conquer the whole world and create a new Holy Empire where all shall know the blessing of justice and peace. You

men have two choices. You may accept the Holy Emperor's great mercy and join this sacred cause, or you can rot in hell. Your choice."

Though on his knees one of the prisoners straightened his back and spoke proudly. "I'll never betray my homeland! LONG LIVE IWA!"

"Idiot," the Rain officer muttered. He nodded to one of the rain nin standing behind the prisoners. Without ceremony the brave patriot had his throat cut. He died right there in front of them as a pool of his blood slowly formed.

"What about the rest of you?" The officer demanded. "Do you want to rot in hell or do you want to earn salvation doing out lord's work?"

The other seven looked nervously at one another. One by one they all agreed to serve a new master.

The sub commander nodded his head pleased, seven more recruits to the cause. From out of his back pack he produced a jar with ink. This was very special ink; it had been mixed with the blood of their living god. He took out a kunai and dipped it into the jar as he worked a complex jutsu. The ink appeared to seep into the blade, turning the steel black. The sub commander then took up the kunai and nodded to the prisoner at the end of the line. "Him first."

Two rain ninja took a hold of him to keep him from struggling.

"Don't worry, it's over in an instant," the officer promised.

He then stabbed him through the heart.

The helpless Iwa nin cried out in pain and fear. But as the kunai was yanked out the ink splattered out of the blade to mix with the blood pouring from the wound. As the other prisoners watched in amazement the wound healed and the ink and blood formed a seal in the rough form of two lightning bolts.

"This is the gift of your new god," the sub commander spoke in a hushed tone, as if invoking a sacred prayer. "Each seal is unique, and made only for you. With this seal you will be granted great power to be used in *his* name. It also marks you as belonging to *him*. Should you ever betray our Holy Emperor know he can kill you with no more than thought, you are his servant now and forever." He nodded to one of his soldiers. "Cut his bonds and assign him to one of the squads; he's one of us now."

He dipped his kunai back in the jar and repeated the jutsu.

In the distance Pein nodded his head. Even as his army progressed and suffered some casualties he expected their numbers would grow. The power of his cause was irresistible. He would bring this world peace.

Looking out upon the bodies of his enemies and the smoke of their burning homes he thought he was glimpsing his new world.

He smiled, for he found it good.

Setting out

She sensed someone with chakra coming down the street. Karin quickly ducked into the nearby alley and knelt down behind some trash cans. She had on an old grey cloak with a hood. She had the hood up and was deliberately covering her face. She didn't dare use a henge to disguise herself. That was for the very good reason that a henge would give off a slight trace of chakra that an experienced ninja might notice. She could only completely dampen her chakra signature and her presence if she didn't use her chakra.

Hiding behind the trash she saw a light haired man walk past without so much as a glance in her direction. He had on a Rain hitai-ite with a deep gash down the middle. *Does he just happen to be here or is he looking for me?* Despite the attacks on Earth and Grass there still seemed to be Rain ninja *everywhere*. She'd originally planned to make a dash for Fire country and safety, but with the war on the borders had been sealed and were being patrolled. If she ran into any rain Ninja she was dead. *I'm not a fucking fighter! I'm a fucking researcher!* Her one gift was to be able to expertly sense the chakra signatures of others from a long distance, and to be able to disguise her own. So far that ability had kept her alive. But she knew it was only a matter of time before her luck ran out. She had to get out of Rain country!

She'd come to the town of Nawi near the Fire country border in search of help. During her years of work first with Orochimaru and then with Akatsuki she had made all sorts of interesting acquaintances. Out of desperation she had reached out to a couple of them. It was dangerous, but if she didn't do something she knew she was doomed.

Sensing the ninja was far enough away she got up and hurried back down the street. Like a frightened animal searching for a safe haven.

I wish Jiraiya were here, Sarutobi thought. *What I need above everything else is information about this strange new threat.* The Hokage would have contacted him and ordered him to return to Konoha except for one slight problem, he didn't know where he was or how to reach him. Konoha's spy master made it a point to never let anyone know his whereabouts or his intentions. He'd left over a year ago to spy on Akatsuki and uncover what they were up to. Their sudden disappearance and inactivity had alerted Jiraiya that something major had to be going on. Jiraiya's instinct had proven right, but he'd sent back very little despite his effort and time.

What the Hokage had to go on right now were reports from the field, and those were not promising. Organizing an army, even a relatively small one, was not something that could be done instantly. Even working at a breakneck pace it had taken a few days. In that time the patrol he'd sent to Grass had sent back a couple reports by messenger bird. He'd also received three additional requests for aid from Grass, each one more desperate than the last. In the last war Kusa had resisted a powerful surprise attack from Iwa and held out until relief forces from Konoha had arrived. The Grass nin had proved themselves quite capable in that war. Despite heavy losses they had successfully defended their village.

Sarutobi had expected nothing less this time around. Especially since early estimates put the size of the invading force as being quite small. He'd thought Kusa would easily be able to hold the enemy at bay until his ninja could again come to their relief. But there was disturbing evidence that the Grass army was coming apart. All signs seemed to suggest they'd been smashed in every engagement against the enemy. His field reports from his scouts spoke of burned out towns and villages deep in Grass country and battlefields littered with scores of Grass dead but only a handful of Rain bodies.

The mounting desperation in the notes from Grass also made it obvious they were beginning to panic. *Can such a small force really be so powerful?* It was a troubling thought and had forced him to hurry the formation of the expeditionary force. He would have

preferred spending a little more time preparing it and mapping out a general strategy for it once deployed. Unfortunately circumstances demanded it get in the field as fast as possible.

The scouts he'd sent to Earth had not reported yet, that was a very bad sign. It likely meant his people had been killed, by whom and under what circumstances he could not guess. Unlike Grass no further messages had come from Iwa. Rain had sealed its borders the moment war began and had made no announcements about the fighting. So right now no one outside the actual combatants had any idea how that fight was progressing. Sarutobi wasn't sure what to make of the silence from the Tsuchikage, hopefully it was a sign he felt his forces would not need help after all.

The Tsuchikage stood atop the Tower of Earth looking out at his magnificent village. The huge stone buildings rose high into the sky and proclaimed the glory of his people and his homeland. Behind him there was a swirl of air and dirt. Motsuwa, his spy master and one of his most trusted aids appeared.

"Report," the Tsuchikage commanded.

The small man licked his lips and spoke carefully. The Tsuchikage's fury was a frightening thing. "Tsuchikage-sama, the city of Tarumizu has fallen." He waited fearfully for the response.

The Tsuchikage did not turn around. He continued to look out over his home village. "I ordered Tarumizu be defended at all cost." It was the largest city in Earth country with over a million residents. Its loss was shocking, especially after only a couple days of fighting. At the very least it should have taken weeks for an enemy to capture. "General Yoshiro will pay for this with his head." Despite the hard words the Tsuchikage did not raise his voice, he seemed outwardly calm.

"General Yoshiro died in the fighting, Tsuchikage-sama." Motsuwa informed him.

The Tsuchikage nodded, not really surprised. "Well at least he had that much sense. Obviously if he lost so quickly he must have been incompetent."

Motsuwa spoke *very* carefully. "I don't believe that was the case Tsuchikage-sama, all reports seem to indicate the men were well deployed and fought well."

Now the Tsuchikage did turn around to face him. There was cold fury in his grey eyes. "Then tell me Motsuwa, how were they defeated so quickly?" His voice was still calm but held a deadly threat.

Motsuwa took a deep breath; his next words might be his last. But his duty as a Rock ninja required him to speak the truth.

"Tsuchikage-sama, I believe the enemy was simply too powerful for our forces to defeat."

His master glared down at him and his hands became trembling fists. Motsuwa lowered his head and calmly waited for whatever would happen. After what seemed a lifetime he heard his master's voice. "How many of our ninja escaped and are still available?"

"A little more than half," Motsuwa answered quietly.

Two thousand ninja had been sent to hold Tarumizu. He'd lost roughly a thousand of them, a fifth of all his forces, and they'd only been able to hold the enemy back two days. He turned back to look at his village. "Tell general Tamotsu I have full confidence in him and that he is to defend our homeland to the best of his ability. Inform him he will get all the reserves we have as quickly as we can get them to him."

"Yes, Tsuchikage-sama."

"Also, send a message to the Daimyo, Tell him I am formally requesting he raise the levees and call out the militia. They are to assemble here, in Iwa."

"You wish to call out the militia?" Motsuwa was shocked. It was generally accepted that any Genin was the match of at least twenty armed and well trained me. A Chunin was a match for fifty, and a Jonin at least a hundred if not more. The militia were nothing but raw barely trained peasants who were mainly expected to deal with local riots and such. All serious fighting was left to ninja or sometimes to the small professional army of a few thousand the Daimyo kept. Even in the tens of thousands the poorly armed and trained peasants would be slaughtered. It would be murder to send them up against any ninja army, let alone the fearsome ninja from Rain.

"Are you questioning my orders?" The Tsuchikage asked quietly.

"No Tsuchikage-sama!" He answered quickly.

"You may go, you are dismissed."

"Hai!" Motsuwa wasted no time in vanishing.

Alone again the Tsuchikage continued to look out at his beloved village. He wondered how much longer he would be able to.

"Please be careful Naruto-kun! Don't take any foolish chances!" Hinata was hugging him with a surprising strength. The army had finally been assembled as was about to leave for the front. Hinata had not been one of the medic nins chosen to join it.

Naruto was squeezing back and giving her a reassuring smile. "Don't worry Hinata-chan! When have I ever done anything foolish?"

She simply looked at him.

"Heh, forget I said that," he leaned in and gave her a very long sweet kiss. Once doing this in public would have caused his girl to faint dead away. She really had grown much more confident, both in herself, and in them. When he came up for air he smiled down at his beautiful girlfriend. "For luck."

"For luck," she agreed and kissed him again. She wanted to give him all the good fortune she possibly could.

From a short distance away Sakura looked on silently. She was among the many Genin selected to go to battle. Looking on she wondered about what might have been if she had been just a little kinder to her former teammate when they were younger. Despite her best efforts she had been left behind. She had tried to win him over but had come to understand that she was too late. He loved Hinata and there was no room for her in his heart anymore. She knew he would always care for her, but only as a friend.

As the expeditionary force left the villagers came out to cheer for them and wish them all safe return.

As they moved they spread out to give everyone plenty of room. Spotting Kakashi Naruto decided to go up alongside and talk to him.

"Does your ass still hurt?" Naruto asked with a straight face.

Kakashi looked over to him. "Sorry, did you say something?"

Naruto had a sudden urge to start railing about Kakashi's hip attitude but held back.

A moment later Kakashi spoke again in all seriousness this time. "You've become quite a ninja Naruto, and I'm not ashamed to say you've become more powerful than me."

"Thanks Kakashi-sensei!" Despite some hard feelings from the past Naruto did respect Kakashi and hearing that really made him feel good.

"It's only natural," Kakashi stated. "Each generation surpasses the one before it. It's a law of nature."

Naruto looked really excited. "I can't wait for the chance to show everyone what I can do!"

"Don't be so eager Naruto," Kakashi cautioned. "War isn't something to look forward to."

"Hey! I've seen war before, I'm a veteran!"

Kakashi's one visible eyebrow rose. "You are a veteran Naruto," he conceded. "But your war experience lasted exactly one day. I expect this is going to be a little different."

"Whatever happens I'll definitely be able to handle it!" He was staring at Kakashi and proudly thumping his chest.

Kakashi looked at him with a hidden smile. "Look out for that tree."

"Huh?"

Smack!

As Kakashi sped past he called out over his shoulder. "Even with great power Naruto you still have to pay attention to what you're doing."

Pulling himself off the side of the tree he'd just run into he rubbed his aching forehead and shouted in Kakashi's direction. "That was for the ass poke wasn't it?!"

Karin was sitting at the bar. She had to force herself not to run as the man came over and took the seat next to hers. He was dressed as nothing but a common day laborer. Despite that she could sense immense chakra coming from him, she was also aware that he had a henge on. She had contacted some people about getting out and they had put her in touch with 'Nanashi' who claimed he could take her to Konoha safely. Meeting this man was an awful risk, but she was desperate.

Nanashi brought a beer to his lips and whispered to her before drinking. "I understand you worked for the leader here and have information about his troops."

It doesn't matter; if he's a Rain nin I'm already dead. She put a hand over her mouth and whispered back, "That's right. If you can take me to Konoha I have valuable information for your Hokage."

He was about to reply when he stopped and turned around in his seat.

She knew why, she'd felt it too, a pair of very strong chakra signatures had just appeared outside the bar. She turned around as well and gasped in horror and two figures in black robes with red clouds entered. She recognized them as Sasori and Deidara.

And worst of all they recognized her.

"At last," Sasori said in his baritone voice. "Come with us now, we have some questions for you."

Oh kami this is it, I'm fucking dead. She knew there was no way she could escape them now.

The man beside her calmly finished his beer and set the empty glass down on the table. "It's a real shame," he said. "I liked this place." He put his thumb in his mouth and bit down and then performed some hand signs. " **Kuchiyose no Jutsu.**"

There was a massive puff of smoke and Karin cried out in surprise at the sudden jolt of being about fifty feet off the ground. She looked about in startled wonder. "A... a giant frog?"

"Who are you calling a frog?" An angry voice boomed out. "I'm a toad obviously!"

She looked over to the man she had just met his appearance had completely changed as well. He looked older now with spiky white

hair and red lined running down from each eye. "Who... who are you?"

He looked at her with a broad smile. "The one and only Jiraiya, legendary toad sage." Looking out he saw the blonde ninja from earlier rising into the air on the back of a giant clay bird. "Now hold on, things are about to get a little rough."

Omake

It was the day before the expeditionary force was set to leave for the new war. Naruto and Hinata were alone on his couch making out.

"Naruto stop!" She slapped away his over eager hand.

"Aw come on Hinata-chan!"

"Naruto-kun you know I'm not that kind of girl."

He looked at her with big glistening eyes. "I know Hinata-chan, it's just that," he took a deep breath and turned to her staring deep into her lavender eyes. "I'm going off to war tomorrow and anything could happen. I'd hate to leave with any last regrets."

Smiling back at him she gave his hands a gentle squeeze. "Naruto-kun, I love you and I will go to the temple every single day to offer prayers and sacrifices for your safe return." He moved in closer. "We're not having sex though."

"Aw come on Hinata-chan! Please!" He whined and pleaded.

"Not until we're married," she said firmly.

He dropped his head in defeat.

"But," she said and pulled off her shirt revealing a bulging black satin bra. "Maybe there's something I can give you since you are going off to war."

He looked at her very nervously and felt his heart pounding like crazy. "Wh... what?"

Smiling she reached behind her back and he could hear the snaps as she undid her bra. "Want to have a PG-13 relationship?"

"Huh?"

Her bra fell away and for the very first time he was able to gaze upon Hinata's *glorious* breasts. He stared at them for a second.

"Hinata-chan you are the best girlfriend EVER!!"

He pounced and she giggled as they both enjoyed themselves.

The opening engagement

Out of Sasori's body rose a giant metal tail with a razor sharp blade at the end of it. "If you get in our way you will regret it." The tail stabbed forward and sliced into Gamabunta's webbed foot.

"Ow!" Gamabunta looked down to see who had just wounded him.

Whomp!

Gamabunta stepped on Sasori and deliberately ground down. His wound was a small one given his body mass, but it was starting to burn

"Heads up!" Jiraiya shouted and pointed at the ninja on his giant clay bird. Several clay birds were heading down towards them. Gamabunta leapt high into the air avoiding the projectiles that instead stuck the surrounding neighborhood and detonated on impact.

" **Water Bullet!** " Gamabunta shouted. Inhaling the boss toad fired off two huge spheres of water in quick succession.

Seeing them Deidara had only a few seconds to react. A sharp bank to the right let him avoid the first, but took him straight into the path of the second. He was swatted as he and his mount were sent careening to the ground.

"Let's get out of here as fast as we can," Jiraiya called.

"Fine," Gamabunta grunted, his wound was acting up. He leapt high into the air and quickly headed south towards Fire country.

Karin yelped and had to focus chakra to her feet to keep from getting tossed off. The swift up and down motion of the toad's leaps were making her feel ill.

Sasori's, 'body' was smashed and half buried in the ground. A tap door popped open and the figure of a young red haired boy in a black robe with red clouds jumped out. "Who would have ever expected on of the Sannin to interfere."

As he stood there Deidara landed beside him on his flying clay bird. "Hurry up and climb on, yeah! We'll go after him."

"Yes," Sasori climbed on and they lifted back into the air. "We mustn't keep our leader waiting."

It took two days to reach Grass country. When they got there the roads were choked with civilians fleeing for Fire country. Everyone had the same stories about villages and towns being burned down and helpless people being massacred.

Along with all the civilians they came across a handful of Grass nin who were also trying to run away, they had no more stomach for facing the Rain nin again.

"The village has been destroyed," one of the weary Grass nin told them.

"That's impossible! Kusa couldn't have fallen this quickly," Kakashi said. "It's only been seven days!"

"The village is gone!" The Grass nin said bitterly. "Believe it or not but it is, the Rain nin took it and killed everyone in it man, woman and child. Then they burned it to the ground."

Kakashi, Asuma, and Gai drew off to have a quiet talk.

"Do you believe him?" Kakashi asked quietly.

"He wasn't hysterical, he seemed rational enough," Asuma said. "I think we have to take what he said seriously."

"Yosh! But if Kusa has fallen we can expect no help from the Grass nin. Surely most of them would have used their fires of youth to defend their village."

Asuma nodded. "If the village is really gone then so are most of the Grass nin except for a handful."

"I can't believe it," Kakashi said. "I fought beside the Grass ninja in the last war. If they were able to stand up to the horde of Rock nin who attacked them I just can't see how they could fall so easily now."

"Well the question is what do we do now?" Asuma asked. "The plan was for us to join up with grass in the field and support them. If the Grass army is really gone we have a whole different situation. Do we continue on or fall back to Fire country?"

"Yosh! What do you mean? We are here. The rain nin are our enemies. To retreat without ever facing the enemy would be most unyouthful!"

"Gai does have a point," Kakashi said. "We've declared war on Rain; we're going to have to face them. Do you want to do it here or in Fire country?"

Asuma sighed. "Yeah, there really is no choice."

Nearby Shikamaru, Chouji, and Ino all looked on as Asuma was having a meeting with Kakashi and Gai. The three were all Chunin and had been tapped to serve with the army. They hadn't specifically been told to work as a unit but, as was their habit, had come together on their own.

"What do you think their talking about?" Ino asked.

"Who knows?" Shikamaru said. He was taking advantage of the momentary lull and was lying down in the grass. "It's probably something troublesome."

"You think everything is troublesome," Ino said annoyed.

Shikamaru opened a single eye and looked up at the gorgeous but oh so troublesome blonde. "If you want to know that badly why don't just ask Asuma?"

She sniffed. "I don't want to seem nosey." She said.

"You *are* nosey."

Ino reared back and kicked him in the shin. "Lazy baka!"

"Ow! That hurt you troublesome woman!"

"Well you deserve it!"

Nearby Chouji was munching on some chips and smiling to himself. He knew better than to get between the two love birds when they were like this. *I wish they would go ahead and start dating though.*

Sakura was also nearby. Knowing she was going into battle soon she was nervous. More than that she was also lonely. Tayuya was not here. And while Kakashi was he hadn't sought her out and so she did not want to be a burden to him by going up to him. She had seen Naruto earlier and he had come over to say a quick hello but he didn't know where he was right now. She would have liked to have talked to him, even as just his friend.

Shika, Ino, and Chouji were close by but she hesitated to approach them too. Over the last couple of years they had all sort of drifted apart, even her and Ino didn't talk much. It was at times like these that she was painfully aware of how far some of her old classmates and friends had come. She was never more aware of the fact that for all her brains she had wound up as just a plain old kunoichi while others were Chunin and Naruto was a Jonin and a rising star in the village. *How did I get left so far behind?* She wondered.

A couple hour later the army of Konoha had just passed through a forest of gigantic twisted trees and out onto an open plain when their scouts came running back with the word.

The enemy was here.

"Battle formations!" Kakashi yelled out. "Stay close to your squad mates and remember to support them and watch out for them!" He pulled up his hitai-ite and uncovered his sharingan.

"Yosh!" Gai shouted eagerly to his platoon. "Unleash the flames of you youth and fight with all your heart and soul!" His teeth were blinding as he smiled at them, fire seemed to be coming from his eyes.

Asuma calmly took a last puff from his cig and then stomped it out. He got his trench knives ready. "You ready for this?" He asked.

"Probably not," Shikamaru muttered.

"Hey Shika, remember to take care of my body." Ino scolded. "If anything happens while I'm using my jutsu I'll never forgive you."

"Why me," he complained.

"Just do it you lazy bum!" Ino yelled at him.

Sakura was a part of Kakashi's platoon and waited nervously. She didn't really know most of the other ninja in her unit or how best to coordinate her genjutsus with them. Things had just been too rushed for there to be time for that. She would just do her best; there was really nothing else she could do."

"Good luck Sakura-chan!"

She turned around startled to see Naruto's smiling face. "Naruto, yeah, good luck to you too."

"I have to get to my platoon," he said excitedly. "But I wanted to wish you luck first! So here," he suddenly leaned forward and gave her a small quick kiss on her cheek. It was the *first* time his lips had ever touched her. "You can have a little of mine!" He ran off before a stunned Sakura could make any sort of response.

Watching him disappear among the mass of ninja she reached a hand up and touched the spot on her cheek where he had kissed her. *Naruto-kun.*

They came out of the tall grass from across the field. Kakashi saw immediately that there were more of them than they'd expected. He guessed their number was closer to two hundred than one hundred. Even so the forces of Konoha would hold more than a two to one advantage. As they came they were spread out in one long line coming at a dead run. There was no flank attack or ambush here; it was a straight frontal assault that would rely on raw power to break through.

Kakashi's immediate impression was that they had made a very serious mistake and were underestimating the ninja from Leaf. Then as they got within two hundred yards they activated their seals on mass. Before his eyes Kakashi watched as the enemy ninja transformed from human beings into various freakish forms and shapes. He felt the level of chakra before him grow four or five times stronger, and this chakra had a dark and evil taint to it. In the blink of an eye they had transformed from an army of ninja to an army of monsters.

I have a very bad feeling about this. In his hand his chakra took visible form and the sound of birds chirping could be heard. His Raikiri was more powerful but also used more chakra and could only be used three times in a day. He could use Chidori a maximum of six

times. (He'd built up his endurance and worked on better chakra control.) He had a feeling he would need the extra attacks.

With his sharingan active he ran forward towards his initial enemy. His enemy had dark blue skin and tentacles where his mouth should have been. He had eight rubbery arms with tentacles sprouting out from below his shoulders. All eight whipped out trying to grab hold of him. But with his sharingan he could see exactly where each one was aiming to be and avoided them all with ease. He got in close and slammed his palm straight into his enemy's chest. The Chidori tore clean through the body and put the back. There was an explosion of flesh and inky blood.

Wasting no time Kakashi yanked his hand right back out again. The monster in front of him gave a gurgled death cry and toppled over. His body reverted back to human form, and the ink on Kakashi's arm and shoulder became blood.

"That's one," he said calmly and created a new Chidori in his palm and picked out his next target.

"YOSH!!" Gai cried out as he delivered series of blows into his opponent's chest and neck. Normally he did not like to kill those he faced, but he understood the reality of war. Currently he felt an immense amount of power flowing through him. He had opened three gates and waded forward without fear. This was the first time he had opened any of the gates since killing Gaara all those years ago. Doing that had nearly killed him and permanently damaged his chakra coils. He could still use jutsus but with only about half the strength he'd once had. He would also never be able to open more than three of the celestial gates again.

He hadn't planned on using the gates except as a last recourse. But when he'd sensed the amount of power his enemies possessed he'd quickly decided he could not afford to hold back. He would use all his power from the start and do all he could. With the gates open he knew he wouldn't be able to stand the strain for long.

Asuma ducked and just missed having his head taken off. His enemy looked like a giant black bear and was about the size of one too. Besides that he was very fast and hard to kill. He'd landed several strikes with his trench knives that would have been lethal on any normal opponent. He drew blood and caused his opponent to bellow out in pain, but he kept right on coming. The bear ninja brought his giant paw down and Asuma was forced to leap back to avoid it. He landed on his feet and hurriedly readied for the next attack when he saw his enemy standing in front of him motionless.

"Asuma!" Shikamaru shouted. "Hurry! I can only hold him a few seconds!"

Understanding the situation Asuma ran forward. Taking his wind coated trench knife he leapt up and drove it straight down into the top of the bear's skull going for the quickest and surest kill. The bear fell dead and turned back into human guise. Asuma noted that his enemy had worn a Grass hitai-ite with a deep slash through it.

Asuma hurried over to Shikamaru's side, he was panting heavily. An unconscious Ino was lying at his feet. "Thanks Shikamaru."

Shikamaru gave a single weary nod. "My shadow jutsus aren't working as well as they should. They're all too strong."

On another part of the battlefield there were several loud, 'booms' in quick succession. Bolts of lightning had come down out of a clear blue sky and ripped into the Leaf ranks.

"This isn't going good is it?" Shikamaru asked.

"No, it's not." Asuma replied.

And without warning a new enemy appeared. His truncated body looked like an insect's with six long spiny legs. Out of a still human torso were shelled arms ending with claws. The clawed enemy came up on them and with one swipe slammed into Asuma and sent him

flying. He then brought up the other arm meaning to kill the unmoving Ino.

"No!" Shikamaru shouted. " **Shadow Possession Technique!**" His shadow instantly reached out and merged with his opponents.

His enemy was stopped. But only for a few seconds. He was too physically strong. Despite all he could do he felt the arm about to come down and crush Ino's head.

"No!" And without a second's hesitation Shikamaru did the only thing he could. He leapt in front of Ino.

The claw came down on Shika's unprotected head and smashed it like a pumpkin, killing him instantly. And because his opponent was still connected to him by his shadow jutsu he died immediately as well.

"Shikamaru!" Asuma howled. He'd only been down a handful of seconds, but it had been too long.

" **Rasengan!**" His fist tore into his opponent's body, killing him instantly. Naruto pulled his arm clear with an excited smile on his face. "Who wants some?" He shouted.

Surrounding him were a dozen enemy corpses. Alone among all the Leaf nin on the field he still had plenty of chakra left. His platoon was the only one that had not given ground; he had stopped the enemy on his front single handed.

He spotted a couple more enemy ninja coming at him. He decided to kill these two from, a distance rather than up close. He performed some hand signs. "**Blades of Wind Technique.**" Before him about thirty invisible scythes of wind chakra formed and were sent at his enemies. They seemed to be able to sense the chakra in his jutsu and they attempted to dodge, but had no hope of avoiding them all. Naruto watched as they were sliced up into several pieces.

Looking around Naruto saw there were no more enemy ninja nearby. None of them seemed to want to take him on any more. Smiling excitedly he was about to go looking for some when the radio communicator all platoon leaders wore began to buzz.

"That's six," Kakashi gasped as one more body fell before him. Though he didn't want to he pulled down his hitai-ite. He could feel he was almost totally depleted of chakra, if he used the sharingan much longer he would be in danger of collapse. Personally free for the moment he quickly looked around to try and gauge the status of the battle. One look was all he needed.

He had killed six and here and there he could see places where the leaf was holding its own. He'd have bet those places were where the elite Jonin were. Their best were a match for anything Rain had even with curse seals. But there weren't enough of them. Most of the line was bending back and starting to give way. If that happened the few strong points would be surrounded and overwhelmed. He knew what he had to do. He got on his radio communicator and hit the send button.

"This is Kakashi! Code word rabbit! I repeat, rabbit, code word rabbit!"

When he released the send button the communicator came to life with an angry voice on the other end. "Kakashi-sensei what are you doing!" Naruto cried. "We're winning!"

"No Naruto, we may be winning where you are but not everywhere. I'm in command and I'm ordering operation rabbit into effect. Now I need to do your part. Understood?"

"Roger," an unhappy Naruto replied.

Though he hated it Naruto followed his orders. Rabbit was the code word for retreat. " **Kage Bushin no Jutsu!**" All around him two

thousand clones came into existence. They rushed to every section of the battlefield. They would attack the enemy and pick up any wounded he saw. While his clones covered the retreat the Leaf nin would pull back the way they'd come.

With that done he turned around to look at his platoon. All of them were looking at him with awe and a bit of hero worship. "All right!" He yelled. "Fall back as fast as you can the way came! Everyone fall back!" His ninja nodded and obeyed him without question. He stood his ground as long as he could, he would be the last one to go and he would protect their vulnerable rear.

Ino was fighting in a powerful, but hideous, body when she noted her side was withdrawing. She was actually relieved to end her jutsu. Fighting as an enemy was dangerous and she was near the end of her endurance anyway.

When she came to she was in Asuma's arms flying back towards the strange forest they had passed through earlier. She saw Chouji nearby but not Shikamaru.

"Asuma-sensei," she asked wearily. "Where's Shika?"

He looked at her sadly. "He's gone Ino."

"Go... gone?" She said in a small voice.

Asuma nodded. "He's dead."

Sakura was running as fast as she could. She had gotten through the battle without a scratch, though she hadn't done that much good with her genjutsus. As she was running she was suddenly scooped up by one of Naruto's clones.

"Naruto? What are you doing? I'm not injured." She had noted him picking up the wounded.

"It's o.k. Sakura-chan, I have plenty of energy. I just want to make sure you're all right," he told her.

A younger her would have probably yelled at him for underestimating her and then punched him. But at the moment she was just happy to know that even though he was far out ahead he *hadn't* left her behind after all. When she needed him he would come back for her.

"Damn annoyance," Gamabunta muttered. "I'm sorry Jiraiya but I'm at my end."

"Already?" Jiraiya sounded surprised. They had long since crossed into Fire country but were far from the village. And behind them in the distance were their two pursuers flying after.

"I was poisoned, it's not dangerous but it's weakened me. I'm afraid I'll have to go."

"Up ahead Jiraiya spotted some abandoned quarries from an old mining operation. "Bunta, can you get us to those mine shafts before you go?"

"Sure!" And with a grunt of effort Gamabunta put on a last burst of speed.

He got them to the mines and vanished in a puff of smoke.

"Now what?" Karin wailed.

Jiraiya grabbed her arm and pulled her into the nearest mine shaft. "Now we play hide and seek with your friends."

Author's Note: You know in all my stories I had killed every major character at least once *except* for Shikamaru. I finally have a full set.

Forest of the assassin

Deidara's clay mount hovered in the air above the mine shaft entrance. "Yeah! I'll bury the entrance and that'll be the end of it!"

"No," Sasori said. "We couldn't be certain to kill a ninja like Jiraiya that easily. Besides, we need to interrogate the target first to see if she has passed on any information to anyone else."

Deidara looked over at the red head. "And I was wanting to show you some of my art. Yeah!"

"Do not mistake your childish explosions for real art," Sasori said with annoyance. "Now land so we can follow them in."

With a grunt Deidara complied.

"Another one!" Karin screamed.

Jiraiya nodded and took them down a side shaft deeper into the earth. Behind them another puppet, this one with four huge scythes in four arms attacked the wooden support beams. Smashing them to bits the roof above caved in behind them.

"They're burying us alive!" Karin wailed. "I never should have come with you!"

Jiraiya looked at the annoying woman. "If you hadn't you'd already be dead by now." He had a firm hold of her wrist and was leading her down the tunnel at breakneck speed. "Any way they're not trying to bury us. They're trying to herd us to a spot where we'll be trapped."

Jiraiya was soon proved right as they came to a dead end. They began to double back only to find the two Akatsuki standing there with several puppets.

"I'm doomed!" Karin cried. "I can't believe I'm going to die a virgin!"

Jiraiya looked over his shoulder at her. "If you wanted to be deflowered couldn't you have mentioned it a bit sooner?" He grinned. "Oh well, I guess I can take care of it later."

"What later you idiot?! We're both going to die here!"

"Well you are," Sasori agreed. "However I am willing to spare you Jiraiya if you will simply hand over the girl to us. Otherwise I will have no choice but to kill you as well."

Jiraiya put his head back and laughed. "I wouldn't be so smug if I were you considering you've walked into my trap."

Sasori lifted a single ginger eyebrow. " *I* have fallen into *your* trap? As I recall it was my puppets that forced you to this location."

"You don't really believe I'd have trouble smashing a few toys do you? I *let* you drive us down here to get you as far away from the entrance as possible." He swiftly ran through some hand signs.

"Ninpou Gama Guchi Shibari."

The instant the special summoning was complete the walls, floor, and ceiling of the mine shaft changed from grey rock to a rough pinkish substance. Sasori and Deidara immediately felt their feet being sucked in.

Sasori slapped his hands together. " **Kai!**" Nothing changed however. "This is no genjutsu, what is this?"

Jiraiya looked at them grimly as he took a hold Karin and pressed her against the side of the shaft. With a startled yelp she was sucked through. "Welcome to the esophagus of Iwagama the giant mountain toad! You are now trapped here with no hope of escape. Have fun being digested." He then also passed through.

Sasori immediately set his puppets to tearing out an escape route. But despite looking like soft pink flesh the material surrounding them proved impossible to damage.

"Ouch!" Deidara shouted. "I can feel the acid starting to burn my feet! Yeah!"

Sasori considered their options. They were much too far from the mine entrance to have any chance of making it back there in time. Cutting through was not working. Would poisons have an effect? The walls were living flesh after all.

As Sasori was thinking Deidara came up with his own solution. He shoved one of his hands into a bag filled with his special clay. His hand spat out a miniature falcon which he made life size. "Don't worry master Sasori! I'll save us with my art! Yeah!" The falcon took wing and headed for the dead end which was about fifty yard away.

"No you idiot!" Sasori shouted when he saw what his partner was attempting. "In this confined space..."

Focused on his art Deidara was not listening. The moment the clay bird reached the end of the shaft he made a hand sign. "Bang!"

Jiraiya and Karin had only just made it out when they felt the ground shake beneath them. Out of the entrance came a huge gout of fire and black smoke. Knowing the distance it would have had to have traveled Jiraiya gave a respectful whistle. It must have been one hell of an explosion.

"I'd say we don't need to worry about our friends anymore." He turned to Karin with a too friendly look. "Now how about I help you with that problem you have?"

"Ewww!" She backed away with a shudder. "Just get me to Konoha!"

The rain ninja were flying through the strange forest chasing the retreating army of Konoha. Their leader was disappointed. They had beaten the leaf ninja and sent them running, but it hadn't been the total slaughter all the other victories had been. He had suffered forty losses, more than he had lost in the entire campaign up to this point. Worse they had not taken any prisoners to replace the losses. It was the first time his army was smaller following a battle than it had been before.

Even so, they had won and hurt the leaf nin much worse. If they could catch them as they were running maybe they could finish them off completely.

In the shadows of a tree's branches he waited and hid his chakra signature just as Itachi-sensei had taught him.

"Find the target, take the target by surprise, kill the target with your first blow," Itachi would calmly tell him. *"This is the way assassins kill."*

He could sense one of the enemy coming fast. They were in a rush which meant they weren't bothering to try and stay hidden or look for nasty little surprises that might be waiting for them here. He didn't sense any of that monstrous chakra coming from anyone. It seemed all his opponents were back in their usual forms.

He smiled. That would make his job easier.

As the target approached he was ready. Just as he was flying past Naruto leapt down on him from above. There were no childish shouts or war cries as there might have been when he was a kid. He was silent as he plunged his kunai into the man's throat. Killing him with his first blow.

A ninja with a scratched Grass hitai-ite was running along the ground as fast as he possibly could. His eyes were darting about looking for

tracks and anything that might be suspicious. As fast as he was moving he had no trouble adjusting to follow the tracks. Being able to avoid trouble was another matter.

As he was running he saw something sparkle right in front of him. There was no opportunity to figure out what it was, much less avoid it.

The ninja wire cut clean through his throat and sent his head flying before he even realized it. His body traveled another twenty feet before crashing to the ground.

In another section of the forest a Rain ninja stepped on a trip wire. Again they were moving too fast to watch out for traps. The explosive tags went up with a huge fireball blowing the poor ninja to bits and badly hurting two others that had been following.

The enemy leader shouted for a halt when he heard the large explosion. He swiftly had his men form back up in case this was the start of some kind of ambush. As his men came back together he quickly received word of booby traps and assassins waiting in the trees or hidden in the bushes. From the reports he quickly realized he had lost at least another ten dead with five more wounded.

"Damn it!" He growled. He did not have a huge army to being with. He couldn't afford these pointless losses. If he slowed down enough to check for traps and ambushes that would ruin the entire purpose of the pursuit by allowing the enemy plenty of time to escape. But if he pressed on he would suffer more losses he just couldn't afford.

"Tell the men to pull back the way we came," he ordered.

From a branch one of the many hidden assassins watched as the enemy halted. He watched with even more satisfaction as they began to retreat. He vanished in a puff of smoke.

The original Naruto was at the head of the army with a weary Kakashi riding on his back. Kakashi found it humiliating but had no choice as he did not have the stamina to keep up any longer. Gai was in even worse shape, being unconscious. Tsunade had checked on him and assured everyone it was a simple case of exhaustion due to using the gates, he would be fine after a few days of rest. Assuming he got a few days of rest of course.

With his shadow clone dispelled Naruto got all of its memories. "The enemy's broken off pursuit," he told Kakashi.

"Are you sure?" Kakashi asked.

Naruto nodded confidently. "I've still got plenty of shadow clones keeping an eye on them. If they change direction I'll know."

Kakashi nodded. When Naruto had suggested leaving some shadow clones behind to try and delay the enemy Kakashi had been unsure it would do much good. He had agreed only because they were in a desperate spot and Naruto still seemed to have no shortage of chakra. Now not only had the enemy been slowed down, Naruto had actually convinced them to give up the chase all together.

"You've done an amazing job Naruto," Kakashi told him.

Naruto looked back at him and grinned. Despite some hard feeling she did still respect Kakashi and hearing his praise meant a lot to the blond ninja. "Thanks Kakashi-sensei."

"I mean it, if it weren't for you we'd be in a lot worse shape than we're in."

The smile on Naruto's face flickered and went. "It wasn't enough though, Shikamaru..."

"I know," Kakashi said. "But this is the price of war. He wasn't the first good person to be lost and I'm afraid he won't be the last either."

All we can really do is fight as hard as we can to make sure all these sacrifices aren't for nothing."

Naruto nodded solemnly.

"Since they've broken off pursuit we'll stop now and rest for a few hours."

Once the army was halted the senior ninja came together to talk. They would have to make some hard choices.

"We have ninety one confirmed dead," Tsunade announced with a grimace. "We have another sixty who are seriously wounded, of whom seven or eight aren't going to make it."

"We got mauled," Asuma said as he lit a cigarette. "Our Jonin can stand up to them and most of our Chunin. The Genin who went against them were slaughtered like lambs."

"I know," Kakashi said quietly. "We got beat pretty badly and that was with a two to one advantage and with our secret weapon."

"You mean Naruto?" Tsunade asked with a smirk. "I noted that his platoon was the only one that didn't suffer a single casualty. Everyone in it is talking about him the way they used to about Minato."

"I can believe it," Kakashi said. "I'm very glad we have him with us."

"I am too, but it wasn't enough." Asuma took a long drag and expelled it. "So what now?"

"Naruto was able to make them break their pursuit and his shadow clones will act as scouts keeping an eye on them. I don't want to take the chance of facing them again at our current strength. We'll retreat back into Fire country and send to the Hokage for reinforcements."

"If we do that then the next battle will be on our home soil," Asuma said.

"I know that, but we don't really have a choice."

After a four hour rest the army got moving again and headed back across the border to their homeland.

Karin stood there nervously. She had always heard that the Third Hokage was a terribly soft and kind hearted man. The way he was staring at her with those unforgiving eyes she couldn't imagine it.

"What do you want?" Sarutobi asked her in a cold voice.

Jiraiya, who was also present, didn't think it was an act. Given what she was a part of he could believe the cold and harsh attitude the old man was giving her.

"All... all I ask for is clemency and asylum... Hokage-sama." Karin answered. Any thought of asking for some money fled the moment she saw her reception.

"Done, though it sickens me to agree. In your own way you are every bit as monstrous as Orochimaru was."

"I am only a researcher," she said defensively. "I only study what my employer want s me to. I have no part in how my discoveries are put to use."

"And how did you think your creation would be used?" Sarutobi demanded harshly. "For that matter exactly what sort of, 'research' did you perform? I saw with my own eyes the kind Orochimaru practiced. Was yours similar?"

She looked down fearfully. She knew this was very dangerous territory. "I did what was required to gain knowledge. If... if you grant

me clemency and your protection you cannot punish me for what I did before."

"Unfortunately you are right, though saying so leaves a bitter taste in my mouth." He looked at her with those remorseless eyes. "I grant you a pardon for any crimes you have committed prior to this moment. I will permit you to live in this village and grant your request for asylum; no harm shall be done to you. On condition you commit no further crimes and cooperate with us fully."

She nodded eagerly. "Of course! The disk I provided will give you all the raw information on the curse seal. And naturally I'll be happy to answer any questions."

Though unhappy the Hokage nodded. He had often had to commit evil to protect and serve the greater good; this was one of those times. "My own researchers are eager to speak to you, but first I want you to tell me everything you can about this seal."

She nodded obediently. "Yes Hokage-sama."

She began to tell him the horrible truth about this terrible new weapon.

Time of the assassin

"The Legacy Seal is based on Orochimaru's seal," Karin began. Both Sarutobi and Jiraiya listened intently. "As with the original seal the blood of the caster is a necessary component and allows him to detect and inflict harm on anyone bearing the seal. However my team and I were able to make a great many improvements upon the original version."

"You sound proud of yourself," Jiraiya noted.

Karun turned to him with a placid face. "I'm a professional, there is nothing wrong in doing the best you can at an assignment and in taking pride in your accomplishments."

"Please continue," Sarutobi said tightly.

"Of course Hokage-sama," she answered immediately. "The most important improvement is the fact the seal no longer has a 90 percent lethality rate to those who receive it. That was always the original seal's greatest weakness. That is the reason why there were never more than a handful of Sound ninja with the curse seal, and why the vast majority of those who attacked three years ago were ordinary shinobi."

"Which is no longer the case," Sarutobi commented. "What is this versions rate of lethality?"

"Zero," Karin answered. Then she thought for a moment. "Or a hundred, it depends on your viewpoint."

"Please explain."

"Essentially, applying the seal is done by inflicting a mortal wound on the subject. The jutsu is cast while a knife covered in ink is stabbed through the heart."

"What?" Jiraiya gasped. "Are you saying all those ninja out there are *corpses*?!" He well remembered the final show down with Orochimaru and how Minato and the first two Hokages were temporarily reanimated. To his relief Karin shook her head.

"No, they're alive. But only because of the seal. The moment the heart is stabbed it is healed by the seal which then spreads through the rest of the body. The core of the seal remains in the subject's heart though. Which means that without the seal the subject dies immediately. Once someone has the seal placed on them it cannot be removed without causing instant death."

Sarutobi shut his weary eyes, this was worse than he'd expected. "I have received reports from the field that some of the enemy we fought had Grass hitai-ites. Does this mean the Rain ninja are turning captured enemies into soldiers?"

Karin nodded. "The seal guarantees one hundred percent loyalty so yes. Another improvement is that the person whose blood is used can kill anyone with the seal with just a thought. Pein has also provided packets of his blood to his sub commanders so they too can kill anyone within sight with a special jutsu using the blood as a component."

"They obey or they die instantly," Jiraiya noted. "I bet that will keep them loyal."

"Yes," Karin said. "Another difference is that there is only one stage to the legacy seal. It is either active or not, there is no second level to it. There are also limits to how long the seal can remain active before the body starts to die. They can be used for a maximum of only several minutes, ten at the most, before the body simply fails. Recovery times are short though, so if there is time between activations, say at least an hour, the seal can be used multiple times in a single day."

"That is still a potential weakness," Sarutobi said hopefully. "If we can force them to remain with their seals active long enough they will

die or revert back to human."

"The only problem is we have to keep them busy for that length of time." Jiraiya noted. "They seem able to do a lot of harm in a little time."

"True, but it is a weakness," Sarutobi said.

"Actually the seal has one more very significant draw back," Karin announced.

"Yes? What is it?" Sarutobi asked with interest.

"As with the original seal it affects the subject's mind. Only with much more pronounced results. The legacy seal has the side effect of causing insanity in the test subject."

"It drives them insane?" Jiraiya asked.

"Yes," Karin answered in a detached clinical tone. "It progresses faster with prolonged use but I found that all subjects who have the seal become clinically insane with one year. I had one subject who escaped by the name of Yuzuru, he was quite psychotic and delusional."

Sarutobi recognized the name from a mission Naruto had gone on. Apparently the man had *eaten* a number of innocent victims while thinking them to be less than human. "I know that name, he went on an extended killing spree killing many innocent civilians." Sarutobi looked at her curiously. "If he could be killed instantly as you claim why wasn't he?"

"Once he escaped the facility I was able to convince Pein not to. I thought it would be an interesting experiment to see what the subject would do in an unstructured environment."

Sarutobi stared at her. She was talking about it as coolly and calmly as she might have been telling about some survey she'd conducted.

"You allowed him to go about slaughtering people as part of an *experiment*?"

She nodded. "It was a rare opportunity to gather data on the results of long exposure to the seal. It would have been irresponsible not to have taken advantage of it."

He looked at the woman coldly. "Is there anything else you wish to tell me?"

"No Hokage-sama, if you will provide me with some of your blood I can begin mixing the special ink and teaching the jutsu."

"You expect us to use this seal?" Sarutobi said startled.

She looked at him in surprise. "Well of course. How else are you going to defeat Pein except by using it?"

"You just told us that anyone who gets this thing goes nuts within a year!" Jiraiya spat. "And you expect us to use it on our own people?"

"Pein has," she said coolly. "He knows the seal's faults, but he has made the calculation that he can conquer all of the elemental lands within the twelve month time frame. And the way he is going he seems well on the way."

"And then what?" Jiraiya demanded. "What happens if he does conquer everything? What happens a few months later when his entire force start to go mad?"

"Simple," Karin answered without blinking an eye. "He will kill them all with a thought. Once he has the whole world conquered he'll only need a much smaller force to police it. The next generation will not be given the seal. It was always his assumption he would have to sacrifice his entire force. He has deliberately not given his youngest ninja the seal in order to have them available after the war ends."

Sarutobi was stunned at how easily Karin accepted the idea of deliberately killing off all your *own* men in the hopes of winning greater power. As Hokage he had done many things he regretted. He'd ordered Itachi to exterminate his entire clan, sent ninja on suicide missions, ordered attacks in wartime that he knew would cause thousands of innocent deaths, but he had always done that to protect his village and his people. He could not imagine the sort of leader who could slaughter all of his men just to gain power for himself. And that someone like this woman could so easily accept that made him sick.

"You can go now, I am sure my researchers have many questions for you."

She nodded. "Yes Hokage-sama."

Once she had left his office Sarutobi looked at Jiraiya. "She is every bit as guilty of war crimes as Pein is, perhaps even more so. This vile weapon would not even exist if it weren't for her efforts."

"Does that mean you'll have her killed?" Jiraiya asked.

"No," Sarutobi said wearily. "I granted her a pardon, were I to ignore that I would be as bad as Orochimaru or Pein."

"Well that still leaves the problem of how we're supposed to fight this thing."

"I believe we have only one real hope for victory."

Following their retreat from the forest the small Rain army had pitched camp in the ruins of a town they had passed through the day before. No doubt their stay would have been more pleasant if they had spared the town rather than burned it to the ground.

Naruto had still had 120 clones following them, keeping a careful eye on them. When they had camped he had kept a safe distance and

noted the number of ninja they had patrolling the perimeter to guard their camp.

On the crest of a nearby hill several clones were looking through binoculars and making a careful study of the place. Once a clone was made there was no more connection to the thoughts of the original. When a clone was destroyed the original got all the memories, but that was the only communication. Which meant these clones were all on their own.

But of course they did all think like Naruto. At the moment Naruto was having a conversation with himself.

"Just six guards for the whole camp," one said.

"Pretty damn pathetic if you ask me," another clone said.

" **Yeah!**" Three others chimed in at once.

"So we're all in agreement?" The first one asked.

All the other Narutos nodded.

"Let's leave twenty out of it though so they can still be scouts." Another clone said.

Again heads bobbed up and down.

"Tonight, at 3 a.m." The first said decisively.

One ninja sentry was slowly pacing back and forth just outside the burned out wreck of a town. He glanced down at his watch. It was three on the dot. He had one more hour before his shift ended. He put a hand to his mouth and covered up a yawn. He had never imagined they would ever retreat. Since the war began he'd seen nothing but one glorious victory after another as they'd swept aside

the Grass nin and even burned down their village after their last stand had been wiped out.

The oh so powerful Leaf nin had been no match for them either. They *had* fought better than the Grass nin had. They'd been beaten but not crushed. Then going through that damn forest they had run into a bunch of cowardly traps and ambushes. Only weaklings and cowards had to fight that way! That was what the fearsome Leaf ninja had been reduced to, cowardly attacks with clones and hidden traps. Well those could never be more than a nuisance; you couldn't win a war that way.

That was what he was thinking when a hand slapped over his mouth. A kunai went into the back of his skull, turning him off like a light.

" The night is the time of the assassin," Itachi had told him. " No matter how powerful or fearsome your opponent if you can strike him in a vital spot he will die like any ordinary man."

As Naruto pulled his kunai back out He made sure to keep his other hand firmly over the man's mouth. He jerked a bit as he died but did not make a sound. Naruto carefully set him down.

All around the perimeter of the camp five other guards were meeting similar ends. The rain ninja obviously felt themselves to be secure if they had only a handful of sentries. All their victories had convinced them they were safe. That no one would *dare* attack them.

Naruto smiled. They were about to get one very rude lesson in what happens when you go to war with Konoha. He made a signal. Out of the tall grass twenty figures got up and silently ran forward into the now undefended town. No sound and no trace of chakra came from any of them. They slid into the shadows as easily and naturally as Itachi-sensei could have wanted. He was using everything he'd been taught in the last year.

The door to a relatively intact building opened, it was not locked. From earlier surveillance he had picked out five spots where he believed the Rain nin were gathered. Quickly and quietly ten shadow clones walked into the darkened building. Naruto was extremely happy to see twenty sleeping bags laid out with men asleep in all of them.

"Who's there?" Someone who was still awake called out.

Naruto answered, making the first bit of noise he had since entering the town. "The Lord Hokage sends you his greetings."

Then he and the other nine clones all poured chakra into their explosive notes.

Throughout the town five huge explosions went off in almost the same instant, killing about half the enemy ninja. Men began pouring out into the street in confusion shouting and asking what was happening. As they did so the other fifty clones that had spread out through the town began to pick them off one by one. Most of them died without ever knowing they were in danger.

When morning came only 33 of them were left alive.

That morning Naruto was eagerly updating Kakashi and the others about what his clones had done when Jiraiya arrived on the back of a toad.

"Hey ero-sennin!" Naruto shouted. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Have you come to take over command of the army?" Kakashi asked eagerly.

"Sorry Kakashi, I'm actually here to bring Naruto back to Konoha with me."

"WHAT?!!" Naruto screamed. "You want me to leave the army when we're at WAR?!"

"I know we're at war kid!" Jiraiya snapped at him. "The Hokage has ordered me personally to come get you. There's a special job that only you can do and the fate of the village depends on it!"

Naruto blinked at that. He couldn't really argue if the old man wanted him for a special mission.

The two of them headed back to Konoha.

Late that day Pein received a messenger bird from his army in Grass. What he read there caught him by surprise. Apparently after conquering all of Grass and defeating the leaf in a battle his army there had been nearly wiped out by a single ninja.

Uzumaki Naruto.

"Interesting," he said aloud.

"What's that?" Konnan asked.

"It seems my army in Grass has run into some difficulties." He spoke without any worry in his voice. "It looks as though conquering Fire country will have to wait until we are done here."

She shrugged. "You didn't expect it to be easy."

"No, and it really does not matter." He began writing out orders for his Grass army to simply hold in place. He would send them a couple hundred men for reinforcement. "In truth I prefer it this way. I want to be there to see Konoha burn with my own eyes."

A special mission

Moving as fast as they could they arrived back at the Tower in just a day and a half. Jiraiya had refused to divulge just what the Hokage had in mind for him so when they were ushered into the Hokage's office Naruto was not in a happy mood.

"Hey old man what's going on? Why'd you bring me all the way back here just when things are getting good? I mean what's more important than beating the enemy you're at war with?"

Despite Naruto's anger Sarutobi remained completely at ease. "Nothing is more important than that Naruto, which is why I had Jiraiya bring you back here."

Naruto appeared lost. "What do you mean? If fighting this war is the most important thing then why'd you drag me away from it? We're finally winning!"

Jiraiya snorted. "Winning a battle is very different from winning a war. The only battle that truly matters in any war is the last one."

"But the enemy is wrecked! I know we can finish them!"

"Naruto," Sarutobi said calmly. "The enemy you and the others have been fighting represent only a fraction of Pein's forces. By our best estimates perhaps as little as only ten percent. The vast bulk of the enemy army has been in Earth country."

"Ten percent? No way! That's just plain impossible!"

"Believe it kid, the enemy leader Pein is driving towards Iwa right now. We haven't gotten much info about the battles in Earth so far but we do know that Tarumizu has fallen. That should tell you all you need to know."

Naruto looked at Jiraiya. "Why? Is this Tarumizu place important or something?"

Jiraiya closed his eyes. "What the hell are they teaching you kids in the academy these days?"

"Tarumizu is the largest city in Earth country Naruto," Sarutobi explained with a fatherly tone. "Behind the Daimyo's palace and the village of Iwa itself it is the most important and strategic location in Earth. The rock nins would never have yielded it without a huge battle. Yet it was taken in the opening days of this war. What does that tell you?"

He shrugged. "That the rock nins are getting pounded."

"True, and what e/se does it suggest?"

Naruto thought a moment and frowned. "For one of the Great villages to get beaten like that the Rain nins there must have been really powerful."

"Great kid," Jiraiya began clapping sardonically. "Give you enough chances and you can see some things on your own. Yeah, the Rain forces there must be pretty fearsome if they've done this much this quickly. Earth country isn't going to survive; the best it looks like we can hope for is that they'll keep Pein and his main army busy for awhile. But once he's done with them he'll turn south and start heading for here with everything he's got."

"Then we'll fight him with everything we have!" Naruto said.

"We will," Sarutobi confirmed. "And very likely we will be defeated."

"How can you say that old man?! How can we lose if we all fight together?"

"Naruto, do you think I like saying such a thing?" Sarutobi asked. "I have watched this generation come of age and I have unshakable

faith in the ninja of this village and in their will of fire. I do not doubt that they will fight with all their courage and strength. But against this enemy I fear it will not be enough."

"You saw what it was like fighting a couple hundred of them," Jiraiya said. "Could we defeat a thousand? Two thousand? Three? That's what we'll be facing when Pein heads this way."

Naruto was silent as he thought about that. Though he was still in the habit of outbursts when in the company of people he trusted he was no longer the dumb kid he had been. Iruka, Kakashi, Ebisu, Jiraiya, Fukasaku, and Itachi had all taught him things and he had learned how to look underneath the underneath. He imagined facing two or three thousand ninja using those seals at once. The picture that formed in his head was an ugly one.

Sarutobi looked at his face and nodded. "You begin to understand the real situation."

"But... but there has to be *something* we can do! We can't just give up."

"Who the hell said anything about giving up?" Jiraiya asked.

"I have been presented with a couple options Naruto." Sarutobi said quietly. "One was to use the same seal as the enemy. I have chosen to reject this option. While the seal provides a boost in power the use of it would condemn our ninja to death within a year. As Hokage I cannot knowingly do such a thing to my own people."

It was news to Naruto that they even had that option. He nodded his head though, if Sarutobi thought the price too high he would trust the old man.

"Which leaves us one other option," Sarutobi said calmly. He looked Naruto in the eye. "The Hiraishin."

"Huh?"

"Using that jutsu made Namikaze Minato a match for entire armies. If you could master it then you alone could be our salvation."

"Wait a minute!" Naruto cried desperately. "I've been trying to master it for two whole years now and haven't been able to. Now you expect me to figure it out just like that? And you tell me I have to or the village is doomed? Yeah, that's not putting any extra pressure on me or anything!"

"Did you not think you were going to master it?" Sarutobi asked. "Every time we have spoken you assured me you would definitely master it in time you win your bet with Hiashi. You also informed me you have made a great deal of progress."

Naruto crossed his arms and got a stubborn look on his face. "I *will* learn it by my birthday and I have made a lot of progress, but my birthday is still months away. You're telling me I have to learn it right now. Plus there's a lot more at stake now than my future with Hinata."

"I am very sorry to put this additional pressure on you Naruto, but I am afraid there is no choice. The survival of the village really does hang on your ability to learn this jutsu. No one else, including myself or Jiraiya, have any hope of managing it." Sarutobi announced. "Therefore I am assigning you an S plus ranked mission, to learn the Hiraishin no Jutsu. To aid you in this Jiraiya will be at your service and you may have anything else you require."

"I guess I don't have any choice then huh?"

Jiraiya put a hand on his shoulder. "Come on kid, I've been away for awhile. Show me how far you've gotten."

"You're pregnant?" Itachi said with some surprise.

"That's right," Mina said happily. "We're going to have another one."

"Congratulations," Hinata said with a huge smile. With her sensei away with the army she had taken over the medical care of Itachi and his wife.

A slight smile came to Itachi's lips as he took his wife in his arms. "That is truly wonderful Mina, I am very happy."

"Oh I'm happy too Itachi-kun," she told him.

"Tell me is..." Itachi suddenly broke off as he was wracked by a coughing fit.

Mina looked at him worriedly as he doubled over and covered his mouth. His coughing fits had become more and more frequent of late. "Itachi are you all right? Can I get you some water?"

Itachi shook his head and kept his hand over his mouth. "No... I'm fine."

Hinata stepped forward and put a nervous smile on. "Mina, why don't you make some tea and I'll see what I can do?"

Mina quickly nodded. "Of course, thank you Hinata."

As soon as his wife left the room Itachi took his hand away. There were specks of blood on it. Hinata noticed and was not surprised. She performed a diagnostic jutsu and placed her hand over his chest. It took only a minute for her to make her diagnosis.

"Your condition has deteriorated Itachi," she said anxiously. "I can increase the dosage of your medicine but... but there's nothing I can really do to..."

"It is all right Hinata," he said gently. "Tsunade informed me when I returned to the village that by illness was terminal. There is no need for you to be upset."

"You have to stop using chakra!" Hinata told him. "And you absolutely must not activate your sharingan anymore. As it is you might be able to live two or three more years with the medicine and a minimum of stress. But at this stage of the illness using chakra or your kekkei genkai will start to seriously shorten your lifespan!"

"Tsunade told me much the same. Thank you Hinata, I will keep that in mind." He made no promises about not using chakra or the sharingan.

"You still haven't told Mina?"

Itachi shook his head. "It is not an easy thing to tell the one you love that you will have to leave her soon. When we came together I made it clear to her that I might die at any time. A ninja's life is a precarious one. I will tell her eventually, but I wish to give her as many happy days as I can."

She frowned but nodded, as his physician she was bound to honor his privacy.

Itachi turned his head. It seems we have visitors.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata cried happily as soon as she saw him. She ran up to him and gave him a rapturous kiss. "What are you doing back here? What's happened to everyone in the army?"

"I'm back to do some special training by order of the old man. Everyone is fine except for Shikamaru, he was killed in action."

She gasped. "Shikamaru is gone?" He nodded sadly.

"I'm afraid we don't have the time to mourn," Jiraiya said.

Naruto sighed. "I actually came here looking for you Hinata-chan. Jiraiya wants me to demonstrate what I've learned with the Hiraishin."

She looked at him fearfully. "Naruto-kun you know how dangerous that is!"

He nodded. "I know, that's how come I came to find you. I know I'll be fine with you here."

"I don't like it Naruto-kun! You know I hate what it does to you!"

"I know Hina-chan," he answered and gently stroked her cheek. "But there's no avoiding it."

Sadly she nodded. "Please don't go overboard Naruto-kun."

"Sure," he promised with a big grin. He then reached into a pack and came out with a trikunai. With a flick of his wrist he buried it in the ground up to the hilt. He then began walking away while Hinata stayed in that same spot near the kunai.

Having heard the two of them talking Jiraiya was now *very* curious to see just how far the kid had managed on his own while he was away.

When Naruto got about fifty yards away he stopped, this was far enough to make the point. He shut his eyes and focused his mind. *I am the light. Anywhere the light touches I can go.* He swiftly performed the hand signs. "**Hiraishin no Jutsu.**" There was a flash of yellow light and he was gone.

Instantly he reappeared at the spot he had put his kunai. He reappeared without puff of smoke or swirl of wind. It was genuine teleportation. For second Jiraiya eyes grew and he held his breath. *He did it! The kid did it!*

But then Naruto clutched at his chest. "Aaaagh!" He pitched forward collapsing.

"Naruto!" Hinata caught him and quickly set him down. "It's all right Naruto-kun! Just take it easy!" She was already performing a medical jutsu on him.

"Damn it! Every time!" Naruto cried as he lay there on his back.

Jiraiya had rushed over and was now kneeling over him across from Hinata. "What happened?"

"Chakra exhaustion," Hinata explained. "Whenever he performs the jutsu, no matter the distance, it completely depletes his chakra."

"I can make one jump, but then I'm worthless." Naruto said bitterly. "I'm just lucky that with my healing it only takes a couple hours to recover."

"Don't take this lightly Naruto!" Hinata said sharply. "Chakra exhaustion can be fatal! That's why I made you promise to never perform it without me or Tsunade-sensei or Shizune sempai there."

"I kept my promise," he muttered.

"Naruto, despite the failing what you just did was still more than I ever managed! In fact except for the Yondaime you are the only one who has ever managed to get even this far with it. Just how did you do it?"

"You remember those dots on the scroll I pointed out?"

"What? Those smudges?"

"They weren't smudges! They were the Yondaime's way of adding a layer of secrecy to the scroll. The dots represent light, or more specifically photons. The Hiraishin works by allowing you to exchange the matter in your own body for a mass of photons. Because of the speed of light and the extremely low mass of photons compared to other matter that is why the Yondaime was able to literally be in a hundred places at once and not even have to use much chakra. Any place that has any sort of light sunlight, moonlight, starlight, electrical light, or fire light you can reach even if it's on the other side of the world. Just so long as you have a seal to focus on." He sighed. "At least the Yondaime could."

Jiraiya listened to Naruto's explanation with mounting surprise. "Exchanging yourself with light? That's brilliant! It does sound like something Minato would come up with. But how did you figure it out? I mean you don't even know Taramizu is the largest city in earth country."

Naruto sent him an annoyed look. "I'm not good at learning things I have no interest in. But the things I *am* interested in I can learn really well."

"That's very true," Itachi noted. "He asked me for my help and I instructed him between lessons on stealth and assassination."

"I also got help from Iruka and Ebisu and Sarutobi, though I never told Iruka or Ebisu what I was working on. I also had shadow clones reading every book on physics I could get my hands on. Eventually I was able to work my mind to the point where I could visualize becoming light. And that was how I got this far." He shut his eyes tired. "But I don't know what the next step is."

Jiraiya grinned excitedly. This was *much* better than he'd ever hoped for. Naruto couldn't see it because of his frustration but he was actually just one small step from having the Hiraishin well and truly mastered. "Kid I think I can help you! Or at least I know someone who can."

Naruto looked at the Sanin in surprise. "Seriously?"

Jiraiya nodded. "You're going to become a Sage kid."

Konoha's turn

A squad of ANBU were with him as he entered the sealed Namikaze mansion. They were the first people to set foot inside in over fifteen years.

Looking around Jiraiya saw that all the furnishing and painting had been covered up. A thick layer of dust covered everything. *Ah! This brings back memories! Minato and Kushina were so happy here, if only it could have lasted.* Walking down a hallway he glanced at a pair of doors. One had been the master bedroom where Minato and his wife had slept. The room next to it had been the nursery. They had been so eager and excited about becoming parents.

He walked past both doors with no more than a glance. He was here for what was in the room at the end of the hall.

Entering he found several large cardboard boxes. Just to be sure he opened one and checked. He nodded satisfied. "O.k. this is them. Bring them with us."

The ANBU nodded and grabbed the boxes.

Alone on a roof top in the Uchiha compound Naruto and Hinata were enjoying another goodbye. They were in each others arms kissing.

"I hate when you leave Naruto-kun," she told him as she pressed her face to his neck. "How long will you be gone this time?"

"I've got no idea," Naruto admitted. "But it seems really important."

Flashback

"I'm going to be a sage?" Naruto questioned. "But I don't want to be a dirty pervert who spends all his time peeping on girls and writing

naughty books. How is *that* going to save the village?"

"Idiot!" Jiraiya barked. "All that is just my hobby! Being a sage means learning how to master sage techniques."

"Sage techniques?"

Jiraiya nodded. "Let me explain, the difference between ninja techniques and sage techniques is that ninja techniques are limited to the energy within your own body, in other words to your chakra. Sage techniques on the other hand allow you to draw allow you to draw on the natural energy that surrounds us. By adding this natural energy to the chakra you draw from inside you, you will vastly increase not only the effectiveness of all your jutsus but your physical strength as well." Jiraiya grinned excitedly. "Plus there's one more huge advantage."

"What's that?"

"Light *is* natural energy Naruto. Think about it, if you learn how to master natural energy it stands to reason you would be able to control the use of photons as well. You have already figured out the mechanics of the Hiraishin, whether you jump once or a thousand times the method is the same. The only problem is refining your control so as not to limit yourself."

"So you really think this could help me master the Hiraishin?" Naruto said excitedly.

Jiraiya nodded.

"That's great! So start training me!"

"Oh I won't be training you kid."

"What do you mean?! Don't tell me you're leaving the village on another spy mission! You heard the Hokage say that the village's survival depends on me mastering the Hiraishin."

"I know it does kid. *That's* why I won't be the one training you. The situation is an emergency and you need to learn as fast as possible, so you're going to learn from the best! I'm going to get the person who taught me to instruct you."

"So I'm going to get a master at this to teach me?" Naruto asked eagerly. "Who is it?"

Whack!

"Ow!" Naruto yelped and rubbed the shoulder that had been smacked.

"What are you doing?" A grey bearded small toad demanded. "The fate of your whole village is at stake and you want to spend all day playing kissy face with your girl? Tell her goodbye already so we can go."

Naruto glowered at the toad. When Jiraiya had mentioned him learning from a master he had assumed he would be meeting some new amazing ninja who would act as sensei. Someone like Itachi. Instead he was just getting stuck with grumpy old Fukasaku again! He'd been smacking him around for years while teaching him to master the Sage fighting style. And now that he'd actually mastered it here he was being handed over to the unbending amphibian again!

"You really love hitting me with that damn ruler don't you?"

Whack! Whack!

"Yow!" This time both his ankles got it.

"That's beside the point; now say your goodbyes so we can go."

Sparing Fukasaku a last glare he turned back to Hinata with an embarrassed grin. "I have to go Hinata-chan."

"I know." She said sadly.

"Don't worry Hinata-chan! When I come back I'll have mastered the Hiraishin. I'll not only save the village but I'll win my bet with your dad. And then," he gently took her hands into his. "I'm marrying you."

Her face turned crimson as her heart beat raced. "Naruto-kun..."

"I never actually asked you that did I? Not officially." His smile dialed down as he became more serious. "Will you Hinata-chan? Will you marry me?"

"Of course I will! I love you!"

She pressed herself against his body and they shared a long heartfelt kiss.

"Let's go Naruto," Fukasaku grumbled.

Regretfully he had to let her go. "I really have to go now. Please wait for me until I can come back."

"I will wait for you Naruto-kun," she promised. "I would wait for you forever."

He smiled back at her. Fukasaku jumped onto his shoulder and the two of them vanished in a puff of smoke.

Sasuke attached the message to the raven and let him go. *Soon*, he thought.

Just outside the gate Iruka and the other academy instructors had gathered along with all their students. They had received orders from the Hokage to bring the entire academy here for a special exercise. Everyone was surprised to find Jiraiya there waiting for them, several boxes were stacked behind him.

"Jiraiya-sama," Iruka said politely. "What is going on here?"

"We're at war and in war time even the students are liable to be called into service."

Iruka looked back stunned. Like everyone else he had heard the rumors, talk of defeat and disaster out in Grass. He knew that the bulk of the village's ninja population was being hurriedly organized so it could be shipped out to the front. But nothing he'd heard or seen had hinted that things were *this* bad. "You're not planning to send the children to the front are you?"

Jiraiya did a double take and then laughed. "No, no, nothing like that. We're not quite in that bad a shape. I just need some hands to help me with something that will aid the village. I thought this would be a good chance to let the students help out." He turned to the nearest box and pulled something out of it. "Here."

Iruka took the weapon and looked at it. He had never seen such an odd looking kunai. Along with the main blade it had two minor ones; there was also some sort of formula carved into the handle. "What is this?"

"That is a trikunai, the Yondaime had ten thousand of these made and stored in his home." He nodded to the boxes. "I want your students to take them and start burying them in the ground five yards apart. With this many we should be able to cover a two mile radius in all directions in front of the gate."

"You want us to bury them completely? Do you mean you want us to just bury them some to leave the blade exposed? Spacing them out so wide I don't see what that it would do any good."

"I want them buried completely, all just a few inches down."

"What will that accomplish?"

"I can't really tell you, it's a secret. But if things work the way I'm afraid they will then this might help us win the war."

Iruka looked at him blankly. Whether it made sense or not he had orders from the Hokage. "I'll have the students get to work."

Three Days Later

Pein nodded. He was well satisfied. The great outer wall of Iwa had been torn down and throughout the village there were huge plumes of smoke rising. As he looked on he saw one of the famous 'sky buildings' collapse and crash. A huge cloud of dust and debris rose in its place. Along with their military might the Iwa nin had always been too proud of their buildings. They boasted that the tallest buildings in the world were here, made of stone and built using earth jutsus. He had given his men deliberate instructions to knock down every last one of them. He wanted not only to crush them but humble them as well. He wanted them to see that nothing they built could withstand him.

As she usually was Konnan was with him. Together they were looking over the shattered wall where the Rock nin and the Tsuchikage had made their last stand. Thousands of bodies lay broken and unmoving. Only a handful had been his.

"What a horrible waste," Konnan said. "It was bad enough we had to kill so many ninja, they actually sent the militia. What was the point?"

"It's better this way," Pein said. "As with killing the civilians who try to resist this will help drive home the lesson. I have already sent the Earth Daimyo my terms. I am sure that with Iwa a smoking ruin he will accept them."

The terms were simple; total and unconditional surrender. Earth would no longer be an independent nation. It would join Rain and Grass as parts of the new Holy Empire. The Daimyo and all his subjects would have to acknowledge him as their new Holy Emperor.

In return he would spare them. The war in earth would come to an end and so would the killing. All the leaders would be allowed to remain in power and even keep all their wealth and property.

So long as they obeyed.

If they caused any trouble at all he would make short work of them.

"When they are done in the village I will allow the men to rest for the rest of today and tomorrow. Then we will turn south and march." He said and looked at her with tiniest bit of anticipation.

"It is Konoha's turn now."

The Brothers Uchiha

Sarutobi read the deciphered message that had recently come in. He'd read it three times before but was going over it yet again, as though in hope of finding some hidden meaning there he had missed.

The door to his office opened and in walked Jiraiya without bothering to ask permission or even knock. He and Tsunade, well and Naruto too, were the only ones who could get away with that. His old student came over and sat himself down without bothering to ask. "What's up old man?"

"I've just gotten a message in from Earth country," Sarutobi informed him. "It was from a very interesting source."

"From one of our spies?" Jiraiya assumed.

"No, it's from the Earth Daimyo."

Jiraiya looked startled, and with good reason. Ever since the last ninja war the Leaf ninja had been viewed as the natural enemies not just of Iwa but of all Earth country. Even though they had been at peace for nearly twenty years now there were still no diplomatic ties between them. So for the earth Daimyo to suddenly contact the Hokage directly was rather shocking.

"So what did he say? Is he pleading for military aid?"

"No," Sarutobi answered quietly. "It is to inform me that Iwa was destroyed two days ago and that he has surrendered unconditionally to Pein and proclaimed him Holy Emperor. He also informs that that Pein's forces have been swelled to over two thousand thanks to his many prisoners. This army has turned south and is heading towards our borders."

"Iwa's been *destroyed*? That's impossible! Certainly it couldn't have happened this quickly!" Like the others of his generation he had a grudging respect for the toughness of the rock nins. They were complete bastards, but they were brave and knew how to fight. He just couldn't believe that anyone could beat them that quickly and that easily. "I can't believe it."

"What have you heard from your sources in earth?"

Jiraiya frowned unhappily. "Not much, I didn't have many agents to start with, and it seems most of them have been killed. What I have gotten isn't good. There's been nothing but defeat for them." He chuckled sourly. "I never imagined I'd ever feel sorry for the rock nins."

"If you have nothing to contradict this message then we must believe it to be authentic. I don't believe the Daimyo would bother sending me a false tale."

"But Iwa destroyed and the Daimyo forced to surrender unconditionally? It just doesn't seem possible."

"That is what happened in Grass is it not?"

Jiraiya was forced to nod. "But earth is not grass, they are a major power."

"Not anymore it would seem," Sarutobi said calmly. "I have already sent a message to Suna offering to release them from the terms of our treaty if they make an alliance with us and send most of their ninja here."

"What did they say? They took a real beating after their invasion but any help right now would be good."

Sarutobi sighed and lit his pipe. "They do not say yes, they do not say no, they are considering the matter carefully."

Jiraiya nodded with a derisive snort. "I'll just bet they are. They're sitting back waiting to see which horse to bet on. I don't think they understand yet that if Pein beats us Suna will probably next, unless they decide to just up and surrender."

"I am afraid by the time they realize that it the matter here will already be decided," Sarutobi took a deep puff from his pipe.

"What about Kiri and Kumo?" Jiraiya asked.

"They will not come to a firm decision soon enough to do us any good I'm afraid. We are in the same position earth was in when they asked us for help."

"If we go down they won't stand a chance," Jiraiya said.

Sarutobi exhaled some smoke. "True, but they may expect us to be able to hold Pein's forces off for a time and wear them down, as we expected Iwa to do."

"I don't suppose there's any point asking about the small villages? Water fall? Star?"

Sarutobi gave a slight shake of his head. "Our only ally was Grass, the others are staying neutral. We are quite alone I'm afraid."

"We'll do our best," Jiraiya sounded confident.

"I have no doubt of that, but we will be facing an army with over two thousand ninja with these seals." Sarutobi said.

For a moment the only sound in the office was that of Sarutobi in haling and exhaling. Both men knew what they were up against. The leaf army would fight and fight hard, they both knew that, but against this force a conventional victory seemed impossible.

"I want you to go to the front and take over the army," Sarutobi said.

Jiraiya snorted. "I'm no general."

"You have more combat experience and war experience than almost anyone. And given your reputation our men will take heart if they see you in command. I need you in charge of the army, that is where you can give Konoha the best service."

Jiraiya did not look happy. He'd been part of a team and fought in battles as a member of an army. But years as a spymaster had gotten him in the habit of acting on his own without worrying about others. "If this is where you need me I can't refuse, but I think it's a waste of my talents."

"I will feel better and I know the village will feel better if you are there in charge."

"Fine," he said. "Any orders for me?"

Sarutobi nodded. "No battles, keep the army intact above all else. Delay them as much as you can. Set up traps and obstructions, ambush their scouts and lead elements, attack their supply columns, blow up the bridges and mine the roads, and," he took a deep breath. "Scorch the earth. I want us to burn every building and crop field in their path."

"Burn down our own land?" Jiraiya said shocked.

"It will burn regardless given what we saw in Grass." Sarutobi answered firmly. This was one of those times when he had to be harsh for the greater good. "But if we do it ourselves we deny them food and supplies. They'll have no choice but to bring everything from their bases, that will slow them down at least a little."

"But only a little," Jiraiya said. "Two thousand men don't eat *that* much."

"We are playing for time. We need every day, every hour we can get. We have to do whatever we can."

Jiraiya grinned. "Tsunade would love this; we're putting everything on one roll of the dice." They knew what they were buying time for.

"Do we have any other choice?"

Jiraiya hesitated. "I hate to say it, but we could try using the seal."

"And condemn our own people to madness and death?" Now it was Sarutobi's turn to be shocked.

"It's not like it's my first choice! Kami knows I don't want to use it. But what if it's either that or we lose the village?"

"If I could save the village by sacrificing one or ten or even a hundred ninja I would do so," Sarutobi said. "Being Hokage I have often been forced to make decisions like that, in war and in peace. But if we turn to this seal against an army of thousands already using it we would have to use it on nearly our whole army for it to be of any value. As Hokage I cannot condemn the majority of my ninja to such a fate. We will *not* use this seal."

"All right old man," Jiraiya said. "Then I guess our fate really is in Naruto's hands."

At that same instant in Myobokuzan.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

"Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! How can you be so dumb! Jiraiya was a genius next to you and he's a complete moron!"

"Would you stop hitting me already!" Naruto shouted.

Fukasaku started beating him again. "That's it! Your village is doomed!"

That night Uchiha Itachi kissed his sleeping wife goodbye. He had not told Mina anything. He'd wanted her to be happy for as long as possible.

He had raised a few specially trained ravens who were sensitive to his chakra signature. They were meant to deliver messages to him without use of a jutsu. One had come in a couple days ago with a message written in a hand he had not expected to ever see again. The message itself was an old fashioned challenge written in the traditional form.

He'd put the original message as well as letter of apology in a sealed envelope addressed to the Hokage. He'd written a second letter and put it in an envelope for his wife.

Before leaving he stopped by the nursery to look at his son, Uchiha Naruto. He gave his peacefully sleeping son a gentle kiss on the cheek. He then left without waking him.

The village had been stripped to the bare minimum of ninja in order to reinforce the army in the field. With most of the ANBU with the army now it was child's play to leave the village unnoticed.

He proceeded to the tiny farming hamlet of Gakurra. It was only twenty miles from Konoha. There was an old abandoned temple. It was just as the message had said it would be.

Itachi arrived in his old ANBU uniform and armor. He hadn't brought his old mask though.

Entering the main shrine there were candles lit and a tapestry had been put up with the Uchiha symbol on it.

"It has been a long time aniki," a figure in a black robe with red clouds stepped forward. He had on a black swirling mask.

Itachi looked at him calmly. "Will you allow me to see your face Sasuke?"

Complying his brother breached up and tossed aside the mask. For both of them this was the first time they had met since that night. Both of them had the sharingan already activated.

"You look good Sasuke, especially for someone who has been dead for so long."

"I've done just what you told me to big brother. I have lived hating you, it's given me strength. Enough strength to finally kill you and avenge my family."

"Why did you abandon the village and your teammates?" Itachi asked. "You could have hated me and gained strength in Konoha."

"Madara told me the truth and opened my eyes! I realized I owed that village nothing!"

"Madara is nothing but a liar; the devil could take lessons from him. What 'truth' did he tell you?"

"He told me that you butchered out whole family because you were ordered to by the Hokage." Sasuke said bitterly. "Is that true?"

"It is," Itachi admitted. "But did Madara tell you *why* that order was sent?"

"Because father and the rest of the clan intended to carry out a coup." Sasuke said.

"That also is true." Itachi said. "What happened that night was justice."

"What happened was slaughter! It was genocide against our clan!" Sasuke shot back furiously. "Madara told me about the old rivalry between the Uchiha and Senju clans. Told me how our two clans were the strongest when the village was founded. All the others who

came, came later, we were the core and power was to be shared between us. But instead the first two Hokages were part of the Senju while the third was an apprentice of one of them. And the Uchiha? We were shunted to the side and denied what was rightfully ours."

"Now *that* is a lie." Itachi said. "We were given the best lands in the village, we were allowed to form and largely control the Military Police who enforced the laws, we were treated with respect and dignity by the whole village and while Senju had nearly died out we flourished. We were given a high place within the village, and all that was asked of us was that we serve it loyally. But that was not enough for father."

"Father only wanted what was ours!"

"The village was *never* ours Sasuke," Itachi remained calm and certain. "From the very start we were a *part* of Konoha. It was our home and we owed it loyalty. It was never our own personal property. But father was too selfish and too proud to accept that. Even our high place was not enough for him."

"And so everyone had to die?" Sasuke demanded. "The civilians, the children, everyone? Was *that* supposed to be justice?"

"It was a harsh penalty Sasuke, but as the whole clan was guilty it was felt eh whole clan had to be punished."

"Except for me," Sasuke said. "You killed everyone except for me. Why? Did you think sparring me made you any less guilty?"

"I spared you because you were my little brother and I could not bear to kill you. I became a missing nin and held the village's secrets as hostage to guarantee you would be protected. I had a reason to leave Sasuke, but you were beloved by Konoha."

"They ordered my whole clan exterminated *including* me. I don't owe my life to them," he shook his head. "I owe it to *you*, the one I hate the most in all the world."

"Whatever happened in the past Sasuke it is not too late. If you return there now and reveal what you know of Madara and his plans I am sure the village would welcome you back. You are still beloved there."

"To hell with Konoha," Sasuke said. "It can burn for all I care. I called you out now because if I'd waited much longer it would be too late. Pein and his army are going to wipe the leaf right off the map." Sasuke smiled a bit. "But I will go back to the village; I'll go tonight in fact after I kill you. I'm going to kidnap your son and kill your wife."

Itachi looked at him calmly. "Mina has never harmed you."

"And when did mother ever harm you? Or so many others. I'll kill her just because you loved her. Your son will live because he is an Uchiha, I'll raise him as my own and when I tell him about you I'll tell him what a monster you were." He chuckled a bit. "By the way I'm going to give him a new name."

"I cannot allow that Sasuke, kill me if you want but leave my son and wife in peace."

"No," Sasuke said. "If she gave you even one moment of happiness she deserves to die just for that. And I won't let you son grow up anywhere except with me."

"I cannot allow that," he repeated.

Sasuke took out a sword. As Itachi watched lightning crackled up and down its length. "The only way to stop it is to kill me brother."

"I know Sasuke," Itachi said sadly. He allowed some emotion to come out. "I am sorry." He thought of the rules of the assassin. *Find the target. Take the target by surprise. Kill the target with your first blow.* Looking at Sasuke he had found the target.

Sasuke began to move. "Save you sorries for yourself."

Itachi drew his own swords and waited. When Sasuke got close he swung to block his strike. But when their swords crossed there was no resistance.

Sasuke smiled with grim satisfaction seeing Itachi had been fooled by his sharingan's genjutsu. He plunged the sword into his brother's back and felt the sword meet flesh. "Got you." He saw the blood pour out onto the floor and down his blade.

He was surprised when Itachi's genjutsu lifted and rather than his back he found he had stabbed him through the chest. He had been fooled but still landed a fatal blow. "You... you tricked me but still let me hit you? Why?"

He had taken his target by surprise. "You... have the right to take... my life... but not my family's." He closed his right eye. *Kill the target with your first blow.* "Goodbye brother." He activated Amaterasu. Black fire poured from his eyes consuming not only Sasuke but all else before him.

The following morning a frantic Mina contacted the Hokage about the letter left for him. Reading what was there Sarutobi sent out one of his few remaining ANBU squads to Gakurra to investigate.

When they arrived at the temple all that was left there was the cold dead body of Uchiha Itachi, everything else had been burned away.

Towards an uncertain future

Author's Note: Just to be clear, yes Sasuke is dead. As to why the black fire was out by the time the ANBU arrived rather than burning for seven days I think all jutsus expire if the caster dies. In the same way all of Orochimaru's seal were cancelled out with his death. Also the character of Arashen Uzuma was provided to me by, 'Leaf Ranger.'

Two Weeks Later

Sarutobi again held Itachi's letter to him in his hand along with the small note written by Uchiha Sasuke. Given what the ANBU had found Sarutobi could deduce what had happened. The brothers had killed one another. The ANBU of course had found no evidence of another body and had no idea what had happened. But given the 'traitorous' Uchiha Itachi had left the Uchiha compound and village in secret they all assumed he had been planning some sort of betrayal. Only to be double crossed. The ANBU all thought it a fitting end to the man.

And the final tragedy of this long and sad tale was that he could not disabuse them. The village had to be united. He feared what would happen to moral if people learned that the beloved Sasuke had actually been alive this entire time and had been a willing traitor. And he could not restore Itachi's honor without revealing the true causes behind the Uchiha Massacre. That too would shake people's faith in the village. No, Sasuke would be remembered as a hero who died in line of duty, while Itachi would go down as one of the greatest criminals and traitors of Konoha. It was not fair, but it was what the village needed.

He consoled himself with the thought that at least the Uchiha line would survive. There was one healthy son alive now and Mina was

pregnant with a second child. He would make sure they would grow up to be fully accepted by the village without any bias.

He suddenly chuckled sourly. *No, I won't be the one to watch out for them. I am near my end. That duty will fall upon my successor.* His eyes drifted to a map of Fire country. A series of angry red arrows were cutting a swath from Grass in a straight line towards the village.

They were already about halfway there.

If I have a successor. He shook his head angrily and tried to banish the thought. He would not let himself doubt. The village **would** survive! As Third Hokage he was nothing more than the caretaker of the village and of the Will of Fire of his people. He had inherited the responsibility from his sensei and from the First Hokage. And he intended to pass on the responsibility to the next generation.

"The village will survive. As long as there is even one ninja who holds the will of fire Konoha will live."

The words sounded brave. But words alone could not change what was happening on the battle front.

A unit of three enemy ninja came to a halt before an intact bridge spanning a river only about a hundred yards across. They'd seen damn few intact bridges since coming into Fire country. Crossing a river was no problem for ninja of course. The problem was the wagons that had to follow them with food. The cowardly leaf nin were burning out their own country, denying them easy resupply. Foraging parties that went out away from the army looking for supplies were often ambushed.

As were scouts.

Kohaku stared at the metal bridge while remaining under cover. If they could capture the thing the Lord would be pleased. It would help increase the speed of their march and resupply. They were moving

very fast for an invading army, having covered close to 500 miles. They were already halfway to their ultimate goal. But their god was still not pleased. The ambushes and traps cost lives and constantly forced them to stop or at least slow down. The supply wagons had to be kept under heavy guard or they too would fall under attack. The leaf ninja were eager to attack everything but the army itself it seemed.

Kohaku looked to his two subordinates. They both wore earth hitai-ites with slashes cut into them. Of the roughly two thousand ninja in the army now more than half were former rock ninja. Kohaku knew they were loyal enough since they had to be.

That didn't mean he valued their lives like he would have his fellow Rain ninja.

"You two search the bridge for any explosives and remove them," Kohaku ordered.

The former rock nins stared back balefully. "Yes sir," one of them muttered. They had no choice. Disobedience resulted in immediate death. Together the two of them ran onto the bridge. One remained on top while the other ran along the underside. Both of them searching desperately for the explosives they both assumed had to be there.

The one of the bottom spotted something and shouted. "I think I've..."

Ka-Boom!!

A huge explosion filled the middle third of the bridge with fire. Both ends of the bridge lifted up into the air and then crashed down into the river below.

"Damn it!" Kohaku came out of cover to stare at the ruined bridge and all the twisted metal. He didn't spare his two subordinates much thought. Better to lose a couple of them than any Rain nin. "I guess

I'll go... urrk." He slapped his hands to his throat where an arrow had just hit him.

From the other side of the river Arashen Uzuma nodded in satisfaction, three enemies dead, not bad and the day was still young. He was a Leaf Ranger, part of a small unit of elite scouts especially trained for stealth and tracking. (In much the same way hunter nin were.) He put away his bow and got moving to the next river about five miles away. With any luck he'd get to do this again this afternoon.

"Please don't burn down our home!" The old man pleaded. "My family has lived here for generations!"

"I'm sorry, but I have to," Sakura told him.

The man had his whole family around him including daughters and little grand children. They were all carrying bundles, even the kids. They would be joining their neighbors as they tried to escape the coming storm.

"Where are we supposed to go?" A woman surrounded by her children pleaded.

"Take the road south," Sakura told her. "The enemy is moving east towards Konoha so that's the best direction for you. Go to Tochigi, there are refugee camps being set up."

The whole family was staring at her. "This land, this farm, it's all we have." The old man said again.

"I'm sorry." She hated this, but it was her duty. She touched the torch in her hand to the old wooden farm house. It caught immediately and was soon burning fiercely.

The old man and many of the others began to weep.

"I'm really sorry," she said without looking at them. "Please hurry and get going, the roads will be full of other refugees." She got away from them. She still had to burn down the rest of the farm and the crops.

"Give me oil Bunta!" Jiraiya shouted.

"Right!" Gamabunta inhaled and then spat out a stream of greasy black oil.

Casting a jutsu Jiraiya sent fire into the oil, instantly turning Gamabunta into a massive living flame thrower. Even transformed by their seals the enemy ninja were cooked alive by the murderous flames.

When he was done a large section of forest by a crossroads was on fire and another enemy squad was dead.

From atop Gamabunta's head Jiraiya smiled at the scene below. No one was crossing this section of road!

But as had happened again and again his pleasure was cut short as two Leaf ninja appeared and landed beside him.

"We've got more enemy ninja coming from the west," Kakashi informed him.

"How many?" Jiraiya asked.

"Yosh! Fifty at least!" A fully recovered Gai told him.

Instantly his sense of triumph was gone as another dose of reality hit him. "All right, have everyone fall back to the next line! Bunt and I will cover the retreat!"

"Right."

"Yosh!"

Kakashi and Gai vanished as Jiraiya looked towards the west. He had taken his elite Jonin and created a strike force to blunt the enemy's advance. Twenty of his best ninja were fighting alongside him while the bulk of the army kept its distance and concentrated on clearing out the civilians.

They had won long series of engagements, wiping out advance scouts and forcing the enemy to stop in order to concentrate and deploy. At which point they would retreat and do it all over again. They had caused the enemy losses and slowed them down. Best of all they had not lost a single ninja. Jiraiya considered that proof that Konoha's best were a match for *anyone* even with curse seals. Everything a small force of elites could do they were doing.

"It's not enough, though." Jiraiya said.

"What was that?" Gamabunta asked.

"What we're doing, it's just not enough. We keep retreating and they keep coming on. We can't stop them like this."

Gamabunta grunted. "Well you knew that from the start. What do you want to do? Charge right at them?"

Jiraiya actually grinned. "That would be an amazing sight wouldn't it? Twenty heroic ninja taking on an army all alone."

"Yeah," Gamabunta commented. "Very heroic and very short."

Jiraiya sighed. He hated having to run, it went against his nature. But he had to do what he could and keep everyone alive until the end. He could see the enemy ninja approaching now.

"All right Bunta, let's run away."

Grunting Gamabunta turned and retreated.

In Konoha the village gates were open and a river of people were leaving. Despite his faith in Naruto and in the Will of Fire Sarutobi was ordering a mandatory evacuation of all non essential civilians. Unlike in the countryside there were no demolitions here, nothing was being put to the torch or blown up. If things went according to plan the people would be able to return to the village once the danger had passed.

And if it didn't they would at least survive.

"But granddad I don't want to go!" Konohamaru argued. "I want to go and fight the enemy! Or at least stay here and protect the village!"

"I am sorry Konohamaru, but all rookie squads are being assigned to protecting eh civilian refugees. I cannot make an exception for you and your squad." Sarutobi said.

Konohamaru looked very upset; his two teammates looked a bit relieved. "But what will people say about me if I'm a hundred miles away while you and uncle Asuma and everyone else are fighting?"

"They will say that you obeyed your orders as a ninja should," Sarutobi reached out and embraced his only grandson. "Take good care of yourself grandson; I am very proud of you as I know your uncle is as well."

Konohamaru slowly returned his grandfather's embrace. "I don't want to leave you grandfather."

Sarutobi nodded. "You are ninja, you do what you must not what you want. Protect your charges and do your duty like the Leaf nin you are."

Stepping back Konohamaru nodded. He gave his grandfather a knowing smile. "Hai, Hokage-sama."

Watching his grandson leave through the gate Sarutobi wondered if he would ever see him again.

Ayame was looking at the boarded up Ichiraku ramen shop. "I never ever thought I'd see this, the restaurant closed down."

"It's only temporary," Iruka put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "When all this is over you and your father will be back and it will just like nothing had happened."

On Ayame's left hand she wore a diamond ring. After more than two years dating he had finally proposed to her last night. Turning to her beloved fiancé she pressed herself against him and let the tears come. She was no ninja; she was allowed the comfort of tears. "I don't want to go! Irukua-kun how can I leave you when I know what might happen?!"

He put his arms around her and smiled lovingly. "It'll be all right, you'll see."

She looked up at him with wet eyes. "I want to stay here with you!"

"No," he said with a firm shake of his head. "You need to watch out for Teuchi-san. Besides how will I be able to do my duty if I know you're in danger?" He gently touched her face. "It'll be all right my sweet Ayame-chan."

"Will it?" She asked despairingly. With the news of Iwa's destruction and the approach of this seemingly invincible army people's hopes had turned black. It was worse in its way than when the Kyuubi had attacked. That at least had been over in a matter of hours. Waiting for the enemy the tension had just kept mounting with each passing day and hour.

"Yes," Iruka said with certainty. "I have faith that Konoha will triumph in the end, no matter what." He suddenly thought of his favorite former student. Of how Naruto had never once lost faith in himself

and in his future no matter what he was forced to endure. If Naruto could endure and have faith how could he do any less? Many years ago the Hokage had asked him if he possessed the Will of Fire.

' It's what gives us the strength to defend our village. It's the unbreakable bond that ties us all together. It's what makes us a family. I wonder, do you have it yet, young as you are?'

He believed in the will of fire and in those unbreakable bonds.

He leaned in and kissed her. "When you and your father come back let's celebrate with his extra special ramen. I'll invite Naruto and Hinata too."

She smiled back at him. For him she would try and be brave. "Yes, let's do that."

They shared another kiss. Before long she was forced to leave with her father. Heading off towards an uncertain future.

Author's Notes: The next chapter will be the conclusion.

The Yellow Flash of Konoha is

Author's Notes: I have recently joined a community with a number of other well known authors like LD 1449 and VFSNAKE called the Guild dedicated to helping other authors and coming up with new and interesting writing challenges. Two of my new stories, 'That Look' and 'The Tempered Heart' are direct result of challenges from this community. I invite all of you who might be interested to take a look. Here is the link:

www.fanfiction.net/forum/The_Guild/54464/

Naruto was stripped to the waist and sweating. He grunted with the effort of carrying a massive stone statue of a meditating frog on his back. A small bearded frog rode on his shoulder.

"Well it looks like you are finally getting how to manipulate natural energy, and it only took you an entire month!" Fukasaku snorted but it was purely for show. Jiraiya-chan had needed six months to get this far.

"Does this mean I can rest now?" Naruto said hopefully.

Whack!

"Ow!" The statue very nearly slipped as he momentarily lost concentration. "You could have just said no!" Naruto complained as he got the statue centered again.

"This isn't the time to relax!" Fukasaku reminded him sharply. "Your whole village is under threat and relying on you."

"I haven't forgotten," Naruto grumbled.

An orange and black frog suddenly arrived in a puff of smoke. This was Renku, the messenger frog that had been left with the Hokage.

Fukasaku leapt off Naruto's shoulder to go over to Renku who handed him a sealed message. Fukasaku broke open the seal and read it. When he did so he turned back to Naruto with a frown on his face.

"It's an emergency message from the Hokage," Fukasaku told him.

"Well what's it say?" Fukasaku answered him with just one word.

"Tomorrow."

Jiraiya stood on the eastern bank of the river Hayai. Before him was a long steel and concrete bridge that spanned the large river connecting two sections of the main road. This road was the quickest and easiest way to Konoha, which lay just twenty miles away.

Jiraiya watched as the last members of his special strike force crossed over the bridge. "That everybody?" He asked. He knew it was but still wanted to ask to make sure.

Kakashi nodded. "Yeah, everyone from our side is across."

"Have all the other bridges been blown?"

"Yosh! They have Jiraiya-sama." Gai confirmed.

With a depressed sigh Jiraiya nodded to Kakashi. "Do it."

"Right," Kakashi pressed down a lever.

Three large explosions echoed out at the concrete supports were blown up. The metal span gave way with a sickening groan and fell into the waters below.

"Well that's it," Jiraiya announced. "The last barrier between the enemy and the village." He looked out at the sky, it was almost sunset. He knew Pein wouldn't attack tonight. He would want his forces at their absolute peak for the climatic last battle. He would

spend the night getting them across and sending his scouts forward. The army would rest and refresh themselves.

"Let's go," Jiraiya said to Kakashi and the rest of his people.
"Tomorrow's going to be a hell of a day."

Asuma glared at his father. "I refuse!"

"You have no say in the matter," Sarutobi told him coldly. "As a leaf ninja you will obey my orders."

"Then I resign!"

"In that case I will order you to arrested and taken a safe distance from the village."

The two men glared at men another.

"Uhm, I think I'd rather have someone else escort me," Karin said nervously.

Asuma looked at the woman coldly. "From what I hear you're about as much of a murdered as Pein of Orochimaru. What you deserve is a trip to the headsman. What you want doesn't interest me." He turned back to his father. "Why should I take her and all her info to Kumo?"

"If we fall then only Kumo and Kiri will remain to oppose Pein, Suna is too weak to be considered. I could not in good conscience use the Legacy seal on my ninja. However the Raikage may have another opinion. To stop Pein I will do whatever I can and that includes passing on this information to others who may be willing to muse it."

"And what if the Raikage does decide to use the seal? How would he be any better than Pein?" Asuma demanded.

"I can only hope that he would prove less ambitious," Sarutobi said. "But I consider *any* alternative better than Pein's conquering the entire world."

"So you're going to condemn a whole new group of ninja to being inflicted with this thing?"

"That will be the Raikage's decision, not mine."

"But you will make it possible!"

"Enough Asuma!" Sarutobi said sharply. "As is often the case my choice is not between good and bad. I have only a choice of the lesser evil. You will take Karin out of the village with all the information concerning the Legacy seal. If Konoha should fall you will deliver her to the Raikage. If we triumph you will return her here. My decision is made and it is not up for debate."

Asuma shook his head. "Why me?"

"You are one of our finest Jonin and as my son you will have immediate credibility among the Cloud ninja."

"You wouldn't just be trying to protect me would you?" Asuma asked flatly.

Sarutobi looked back at him calmly. "That might be some small part of it," he admitted.

As they had so often before they clashed, but Asuma finally accepted his orders and took Karin out of Konoha.

"You wanted to see me Hinata-sama?" Neji asked stiffly.

Hinata was in the garden of the Hyuuga estate. She turned and nodded politely to him. "Please come and join me Neji." He came

and stood at her side amid the flowers. His form was rigid and unbending, his face set in a permanent scowl.

Hinata did her best to ignore that. She smiled at him pleasantly. "Aren't the flowers lovely Neji? Seeing them reminds me of all the beautiful and wondrous things in this world. All the things that we should fight to protect."

"Are we fighting for flowers Lady Hinata?" He asked in a cool voice. "I was under the impression we were fighting to save the village."

"We are fighting for the village," she said quietly. "And for other things too. Is it true that you have asked Tenten to marry you?"

"It is," he answered curtly.

"Well I hope the two of you will have a long and happy marriage."

"That is very generous of you Lady Hinata."

She looked at him sadly with her pale eyes. "Must it be this way between us Neji? Even now as our whole world hangs in the balance?"

"I do not know what you mean Lady Hinata."

"Can we stop behaving like enemies and try to make peace Neji?" She asked pleadingly. "I always wanted us to be a family."

A cold smirk touched his lips. "We are a family, many families hate one another. You do still hate me do you not Hinata-sama?"

"I did," she answered firmly and with no hint of regret. "When I said those words to you I meant them and it was how I felt for a very long time. You tried to ruin everything I had with Naruto, and you did it for no other reason than to hurt me. How could I *not* hate you?"

In reply he reached up and untied his hitai-ite, revealing the Caged Bird seal he usually kept hidden. "And how could I not hate you?"

"Is that your answer?" She asked him miserably. "Is there no room for forgiveness? Can't we forgive each other and try to be a real family?"

"Hmph, as I've already said we are a family. You have *always* been filled with unrealistic hopes. You get that from Naruto I think."

"Yes, I do," she smiled fondly. "Naruto-kun showed me that anything was possible so long as you never gave up."

"He was wrong," Neji said flatly.

Hinata looked at him with deep sadness. "I see," she said. "Well, even if that is how you feel I forgive you Neji and I won't give up on you."

He shook his head. "Ridiculous."

"No," she told him. "Trying to make peace with the people who are important to you is never ridiculous."

Hidan, Kakuzu, and Zetsu were gathered around a small fire in their black robes with red clouds. They were having an animated discussion about the coming battle.

About two miles away was a large tower constructed entirely of paper. Inside were Konan, all six incarnations of Pein, and Nagato.

"Tomorrow," Nagato said wearily. "Tomorrow I will finally avenge my parents and destroy Konoha. It will be a good long step towards creating my world of peace and justice."

Konan looked at him. He was emaciated and had the control sticking out of his body. She knew they caused him constant pain, though he tried to hide the fact. When she looked at him she could still see the sad little boy who had spent all his time crying.

"Where is Madara?" Konan asked. "Shouldn't he be here too?"

"He disappeared when Sasuke died," Nagato replied. "I'm sure he'll appear again at some point."

"Nagato," she asked slowly. "Do you ever have any... doubts about the path you've chosen?"

With the rinnegan he looked at her. She was the only person left who he considered a true friend, and the only person with whom he could be honest. "No," he told her. "I have no doubts since I understand this is the *only* way to fulfill my dream. I have regrets about all the lives that have been lost, especially all the innocent children and parents. But this is the only way. To create my world of peace and justice a terrible price in blood must be paid."

But does that matter to all the innocents we are destroying? None of them will live to see this perfect world. Konan wondered sadly. "Do you ever wish..."

Nagato eyed her. "What Konan?"

Do you ever wish we could stop destroying everything? Konoha would not be the end. Suna would be next, and then Kumo and Kiri and after that what sort of world would they *really* have? Would it be a world of peace? Or would it be one ruled by fear? Just like Rain had been under Hanzo? But she knew it was much too late for these questions. It had probably been too late from the moment Yahiko died.

"Nothing," she said quietly. "Nothing at all."

The village felt empty. There were more than two thousand ninja still here, but for a place the size of Konoha it felt like a ghost town. Even so the Hokage walked along the empty darkened streets. He could not sleep and wanted to walk and look at the sights.

He had been born here. Part of the first generation of his clan to be born in Konoha just after it had been established by the First. There

were so many memories, good and bad. He passed an ice cream parlor where he had once treated his young students. He passed a restaurant where he and his dear wife had celebrated their twentieth wedding anniversary. Passing the academy he remembered meeting his three students of the first time. His eyes also drifted to a swing and he was reminded of Naruto and the hardships that boy had endured.

Passing the hospital he was reminded of more births and tragic deaths than he cared to remember. Passing the memorial stone he remembered some of the brave ninja who had given their lives to save Konoha. He thought of his eldest son, Konohamaru's father. He remembered the White Fang, even though sadly his name was not on the memorial. And he remembered Minato, noble Minato, the one who most people judged the greatest ninja ever produced by the village. He had watched the generations being born, growing up, and sacrificing themselves to protect and preserve the next generation. This was the constant unchanging cycle of life.

What will tomorrow bring? He wondered. Would the cycle continue or would everything come to a final end? He believed with all his soul in the Will of Fire. Believed in his home and in his people, but he could not banish all doubt.

It all rides with Naruto, the one the villagers scorned and hated. If we are to survive he must be the one who saves us. It seemed at once terribly fitting and terribly ironic that the fate of the village rode with the one person most of the villagers had wanted to get rid of.

Sufficiently tired from his walk and his thoughts he headed for home to get a few hours sleep.

The sun rose like on any other morning.

The day of reckoning had come.

The gates were sealed, earth jutsus had been used to bury them under rock. Along the entire length of the outer wall ninja waited. There would be no more retreats. Today Konoha would triumph or be destroyed forever.

All of the most powerful ninja were on the section of the wall closest to the gate. They all expected that this was where the main thrust would come. Among them was the Lord Hokage dressed in the same black ninja gear he had favored when he had been an active duty Jonin. Not too far from him were his two remaining students.

"You know Tsunade if you want to confess your feelings for me this might be your last chance," Jiraiya said with a boyish grin. This was just some of the same teasing banter they had always shared. So he was surprised when she turned to him and spoke very seriously.

"You know Jiraiya there is something I've been wanting to confess to you."

"Re... really?"

She nodded. "You know all those times I hit you? All those beatings I gave you?"

"Yes," he said. "What about them?"

Smiling she gave him a wink. "I was always taking it easy on you."

He stared at her for a second before putting his head back and roaring with laughter.

Hyuuga Hiashi stood with many of his clan near him including his two daughters and his nephew.

"Whatever happens today remember, we fight for the glory of the Hyuuga clan." Hiashi reminded them.

"As always," Neji replied softly, bitterly.

"Father," Hinata said. "Shouldn't we fight for more than just our clan's glory?"

"And what could be more important?" Hiashi asked.

"Fighting for the ones we love," she answered. "When Naruto fights it's not to win glory, but to protect the people who are precious to him."

"And where's Naruto now?" Neji asked. "He disappeared after the opening battle."

"He will be here," she told him with absolute certainty. "He will be the one to save us."

Neji snorted while Hiashi merely shook his head. "You have a great deal of faith in him daughter."

"Yes, I believe in him father. He has never given up and I know he never will. He will be here and he will save us."

Sakura looked out to the distance and saw clouds of dust forming. It wouldn't be long now.

"Nervous?" Tayuya asked as she stood by her side.

"Yeah," Sakura admitted. "To be honest I'm scared almost to the point of being petrified."

Tayuya grinned. "Don't worry, the worst that can happen is you die."

"Gee, that's cheerful."

"There are worse things than death," she gave her a sideways glance. "For instance being in love with someone and never getting to tell them."

"I know," Sakura said. In her mind's eye she saw Naruto. She loved him. But resigned to the fact that he did not love her. The only time he had ever kissed her had been on the cheek to wish her luck. She had seen him kiss Hinata sometimes, she knew where his heart was. She'd had her chance and had never even realized it. "I wish I had someone."

"Sakura-chan," Tayuya whispered and leaned close.

"Hmmm? Wha... mmmph!" She was cut off as Tayuya's lips pressed down on hers.

"You do have someone," Tayuya said with color filling her cheeks.

Sakura stared at her and felt her heart pounding.

Pein stood before his army. Since before daybreak he had brought them to the edge of the enemy village. His army was now gathered in the forest just out of sight of the defenders. When they attacked he would be following close behind in Konan's tower. He wanted to see Konoha's end with his own eyes.

Looking through Pein's rinnegan he saw the faces of his captains as they awaited the final order.

"Begin," Pein told them.

The captains leapt away and began shouting orders to their men.

On the wall the leaf ninja felt the massive spike in chakra coming from the nearby forest as a couple thousand seals were being activated. The Hokage nodded to Renku and the messenger frog vanished.

Out of the forest came a screaming horde of monsters. More like something from a child's nightmare than an enemy army.

"Here they come," the Hokage said calmly.

Every last ninja on the wall looked out at the oncoming horror and saw their deaths there. They steeled themselves for what was coming.

Then out in front of the gate came a puff of smoke and a lone figure appeared.

Uzumaki Naruto had come.

Naruto stood there all alone, the only person between an army of transformed ninja and the walls of his home. Seeing the unbroken line of screaming creatures rushing straight at him Naruto felt an odd calm. He knew what he had to do and was ready.

He could sense every last one of the tri-kunai that had been buried in the ground before him. He deliberately waited to let the enemy get closer. He needed to get them all in one move or this would be for nothing.

So he stood there calmly breathing in and out as the tip of the spear drew closer and closer while the rest of them unwittingly came into his trap. A thousand yards, five hundred yards, a hundred, fifty, close enough for him to see their eyes and smell the sweat from their bodies.

Now.

Anywhere the light touches I can go. "Hiraishin no Jutsu."

Before the eyes of friends and foe alike Uzumaki Naruto vanished in a flash of yellow.

Then the dying began.

The front line suddenly staggered and dropped. A rapid series of pops could be heard all through the clearing and heads were torn from bodies or holes were bored through chests. In seconds hundreds had fallen dead in the road and in the grass before Konoha's wall.

Like dominoes falling the line of dead ninja began to sweep back. Cries of horror could be heard. Not from those being killed, they died too swiftly to make any noise, but from those poor nin who could see what was coming and had no idea what to do about it. All they could do was scream and then die.

Line after line of them died, with twenty, thirty, forty, or more dying in the blink of an eye. Whatever their power level or ability, whether a lowly Genin or Pein himself they were all helpless against this power.

Nagato was only just with range. Had he fled immediately he might have escaped. But he was too stunned by what he was seeing to run. By the time he did consider that it was too late as his head was ripped from his neck by an arm coursing with natural energy.

It took fifty seconds.

In less than one minute two thousand enemy ninja, the most powerful army this world had ever seen, were dead.

With all enemies eliminated Naruto ended the jutsu. Appearing before the gate again bent over and panting, near chakra exhaustion. His arms were red all the way up to the shoulder.

From the wall there was a stunned silence. They were all staring down at their orange clad savior unable to even shout or applaud.

Finally a single voice spoke and could be heard clearly all the way along the wall.

With a clear voice the Third Hokage spoke. "The Yellow Flash of Konoha is reborn."

Author's Notes: There will be an epilogue to wrap things up.

Epilogue

Author's Note: This brings the story to an end. I hope everyone (or almost everyone) will be happy with it. I want to thank all of you who have enjoyed my story and especially those of you who have taken the time to leave reviews.

I also have a question for all of you. I think it is no secret at this point that I love to write or that I would like to be a writer. However saying you want to be a writer is rather the same as saying you want to be an actor or musician. It's great work if you can get it but most people can't make a living at it.

I am just curious to find out how many of you would be interested in buying a book if I were to have one independently published? It would be at least 200 pages and would be a fantasy story with **NO** characters from Naruto or any other manga in it, a completely original work. Would any of you buy a book like that for \$10?

Right now **no** such book or story exists. I am just curious to find out how much interest there would be.

Notice: Well, it took a few years but I have written an original novel that is for sale on Amazon. It is called, **The (sort of) Dark Mage** and is available as a paperback and as an ebook. You can find a direct link by visiting my website, or you can go to Amazon and search the title.

"Naruto-kun!"

A weary and exhausted Naruto looked up just in time to see Hinata land in front of him. The next thing he knew he was on his back and she was lying on top of him kissing him like there was no tomorrow.

They were in full view of all the ninja up on the wall. A cascade of whistles, applause, and cheering fell upon them. Hinata did not seem to notice.

Naruto did, but at the moment his arms were dead and he was totally at Hinata's mercy. When she stopped for a moment he saw her pale eyes shining and a look of absolute bliss on her face. "Naruto-kun you were amazing! I'm so proud of you! I knew you would save us!"

His face a deep red he smiled up at her, still aware of the rising volume coming off the wall. "Thanks Hinata-chan I'm really happy to hear that, but uh, maybe this isn't the time or place for this."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I can't move my arms, I'm covered in blood, we're surrounded by corpses, and everyone is watching."

The once shy girl continued to smile. "Don't care!" And promptly assaulted his lips again.

Naruto really liked the way she was kissing him and the feel of her supple body pressing down into his. Had he been able to use his arms and had they been in private he would have called this heaven. However he could help but notice that people were jumping down to join them.

Giggling Jiraiya already had a notebook out and was scribbling like mad.

Coughing politely Sarutobi spoke up ruining the charming scene. "I am very sorry Hinata, but do you think we could have a word with him?"

Finally noticing their presence Hinata got off of him. "So... sorry Hokage-sama." She helped Naruto to his feet. His arms hung listlessly at his side. She performed a quick medical jutsu. "Your

arms will be all right Naruto-kun; you'll just need some rest to recover."

"Thanks Hinata-chan," he said with relief. He then leaned close and whispered in her ear. "Later." *That* made her blush.

"Naruto, what you did was simply amazing." Sarutobi said.

Every head nodded in agreement. The entire Council was present along with most of Konoha's top ninja.

"Amazing kid," Jiraiya said as he continued writing furiously. "Minato couldn't have done it any better."

Tsunade approached and gave him something. "I think this belongs to you now." She removed the Shodai's necklace and placed it around his neck. "You did good brat." She placed a kiss on his cheek.

Hyuuga Hiashi stepped forward. Without ceremony he knelt down in front of Naruto and lowered his head until it touched the ground. "You are the savior of Konoha and the Yellow Flash reborn. Uzumaki Naruto I formally ask your forgiveness for my previous words and thoughts concerning you. You have proven yourself more than worthy of my daughter's hand. I eagerly welcome you into my family."

"Thank you Hiashi-sama!" Though it looked a bit weird with his arms flopping about he gave Hiashi a deep bow. "I promise I will take good care of Hinata-chan and always love her!"

Hinata wrapped her arms around him and squeezed him tight. "Oh Naruto-kun," she said happily. "I'll always love you as well!"

Looking about the Hokage decided this was too good an opportunity to let slip by. "Since the Council is assembled I think we should grant Naruto the official title of, 'Savior of Konoha.' All those who agree please raise your hands." Every hand rose instantly. It was

exceedingly rare for the Council to ever vote unanimously on anything, and Sarutobi wasn't done yet.

"I think all of you will agree that Naruto has proven himself the strongest ninja in the village. As such I can think of no one else better suited to succeed me in my position as Hokage. I formally nominate Naruto to be my successor. Is there any need for a discussion?"

If he had said those words just a few weeks ago he'd have had half the council up in arms, especially Danzo. But after the demonstration of his power there was not a word of opposition. Even the diehard conservatives; Danzo, Koharu, and Homura accepted it.

"May I see a show of hands?" Again every Council member raised their hand. With great satisfaction he turned to Naruto. Sarutobi had made it sound as though his decision to name Naruto had been made at that moment. None of the Council members suspected the devious Hokage had been working towards this for years. "Uzumaki Naruto, it is my will and the will of the Council of Fire that you be my successor and be installed as the Godaime Hokage. Will you accept and take on this burden?"

Naruto blinked. After so many years of struggle all his dreams were being handed to him. "I... I accept. Thank you."

Sarutobi nodded in satisfaction. "Good, and since the war has been successfully ended I am announcing my retirement, effective in one month's time."

"WHAT?!" Naruto screeched.

From the nearby tree line Uchiha Madara watched from a safe distance. He had intended to watch Konoha's destruction as he swooped in to rescue the last Uchiha. Sasuke's death had badly shaken him. He'd known Itachi inside and out and had been sure that the man would never kill his precious little outoto. He'd expected

Sasuke to achieve his revenge and become his willing follower. All his plans had been based on that.

Though immortal Madara could no longer father children. That meant to fulfill his dream of a new and more powerful Uchiha clan he needed the help of others. Now with the deaths of Sasuke and Itachi there was only one Uchiha left in the world who could father a new generation. (Obviously he was unaware that Mina was pregnant.) That child was the key to everything.

But after what he had just seen he did not dare try to claim that key. At least not yet. Pein, Akatsuki, and the great army of Rain had been destroyed by this new Yellow Flash. It would be insane to challenge him.

He unbuttoned his black robe with red clouds and let it fall to the ground. He removed the orange swirl mask and tossed it away. He had created Akatsuki and now it was dead. He would need to try something else. "I am immortal, I can wait. A lifetime if I must." He leapt away and soon left Konoha far behind.

"A month?!" Naruto cried. "Have you gone nuts old man?"

Sarutobi smiled. He, Naruto, Jiraiya, and Tsunade were having a private meeting in his office. "What's wrong Naruto I thought you would be ecstatic to have your dream so close to fruition."

"Well... yeah, it's great and all but I don't know how to be Hokage yet!" Naruto said desperately. "You can't just retire!"

"I retired once before, fifteen years ago Naruto," Sarutobi told him. "Had your father not been killed I would have remained retired all this time."

"Well sure but... wait, what was that last part? You know who my father was?"

"Is this the time for this old man?" Jiraiya asked.

"Yes, well past time in fact," Sarutobi said. "Naruto, your father was Namikaze Minato, the Yondaime Hokage of Konoha. You are his son and heir. Your real name is Namikaze Naruto, as the last surviving member of your clan the entire Namikaze estate and fortune are yours."

"The last time I checked they were worth about twenty billion ryu," Jiraiya mentioned.

Tsunade smiled at him warmly. "Hey brat think you could spot me a loan?"

Thump.

The three elite ninja looked at his unconscious form.

Jiraiya laughed. "He takes on an army single handed without blinking but *this* makes him pass out." He took out his notebook and started scribbling. "This will make such a great comedic scene."

One Week Later

Iruka, Ayame, Naruto, and Hinata were all enjoying Teuchi's extra special ramen. Both women had engagement rings on and were discussing details about their upcoming weddings. Naruto was busy talking to Iruka about how things had changed.

"So the Hokage has me with him in his office all day helping him do paperwork! Iruka-sensei you would not believe how many papers the Hokage has to take care of. And he says I'm not allowed to use kage bunshins either!" Naruto wailed. "It's almost enough to make me reconsider!"

Iruka smiled patiently and patted his shoulder. He had worked some administrative duties over the summers at the Tower so he had some

small idea of what Naruto was going on about. "Don't talk like that Naruto, this has been your dream for as long as I've known you. You're not going to give it up because of a little paperwork are you?"

"No," he muttered sourly. "And it's a *lot* of paperwork."

A couple customers entered Ichiraku's. When they saw Naruto there they cried out and eagerly bowed to him. They didn't seem to know whether to call him Hokage-sama, Namikaze-sama, or simply Savior of Konoha.

Iruka noted how Naruto blushed as he acknowledged them and thanked them for their kindness. Iruka was sure Naruto would never ever take the praise and recognition of others for granted. Men like Hiashi who had been born into exalted status might ignore such things. But Naruto would never forget the struggle to gain this respect from the village.

He would always appreciate it.

"Hey Iruka-sensei, you remember the night before the final exam when you treated me to ramen?"

"Yes," Iruka said amused. "Who could forget you defacing the Hokage monument in broad daylight?"

"Heh, yeah, good times," Naruto laughed as he rubbed the back of his head. "But you remember how I told you I was going to be Hokage while you were treating me to ramen?"

"Sure."

"When I told you that way back then. Did you think I would ever do it?"

"No," Iruka said flatly. "I thought it would be a miracle if you just became a decent ninja."

Iruka hid his grin as he saw Naruto's shoulders slump and his face fall in exaggerated depression.

" **But,**" he continued. "The next night when you saved my life and stopped Mizuki I was sure you had the potential to be a great Hokage one day."

"Really?" Naruto said happily and puffed up again. "Thanks Iruka-sensei."

In the Uchiha compound a small memorial service was held for Itachi. Only Mina, Sarutobi, Jiraiya, Tsunade, Naruto and Hinata were in attendance. No one but Sarutobi knew the circumstances of his death, and the third had decided that no one would ever know. Naruto would never learn that his friend and former teammate had become a traitor and had killed one of his teachers. He knew the knowledge would deeply hurt Naruto and did not see anything that would be gained by telling him.

Sarutobi *had* told him the truth behind the Uchiha Massacre. He felt that when his time as Hokage came it would be his right to do what he thought best with the information.

Following the small ceremony Mina approached Naruto for a private conversation.

"Naruto, if... if it's not too presumptuous of me to ask this, would you be my second child's godfather as well?"

"Sure I would! I would be deeply honored." He bowed to her.

"Thank you Naruto, that is a huge relief off my mind."

"Mina, I'll protect you and your children," he promised. "I won't let them suffer because of a lie. When I become Hokage I will reveal the whole truth about the Uchiha Massacre and clear Itachi-sensei's name! He was a good man and I won't let his memory be destroyed."

She looked at him nervously. "Naruto, if you do that you will make some powerful enemies."

Naruto nodded. Sarutobi had explained the situation. Danzo and the other advisors who would be implicated for their part in supporting the massacre would be furious. "Don't worry; I wasn't afraid of Pein so I'm not afraid of some Council members. I will always do what think is right no matter what people think."

Hearing this she felt safe for the first time since losing Itachi. "Thank you Naruto-kun." She placed a kiss on his cheek.

Down below in the plaza most of the village and crowded in to witness the dawn of a new era.

Standing at the top of the Tower Naruto was dressed in his own custom made version of the Hokage robes. They were similar to the Third's but had bright *orange* flames all along the hem. He was not alone atop the Tower. Hinata was at his side holding his arm lovingly and filled to bursting with pride. Iruka, Ayame, Teuschi, the old man, the pervert, grandma, Kakashi, Sakura and her girlfriend Tayuya, Mina, Hiashi, and so many others were there to share this moment.

Looking down at the crowd he saw all their eyes looking back up at him. They *acknowledged* him. He was no longer the brat, the one people hated or ignored. He glanced at Hinata. He was no longer alone.

In his loudest voice he shouted down the words that would complete the ceremony and seal his pledge to these people. "From this day forward I will guide and protect the village and people of Konoha! For I **am** the Fifth Hokage!" He placed the orange and white hat on his head to a raucous cheer.

Hinata let go of his arm and took a couple steps back.

Naruto looked at her curiously.

"That day at the preliminaries," she told him. "I said that when you became Hokage I would be the first to bow to you." She bowed low. "Hokage-sama."

"Hokage-sama," Sarutobi said as he bowed.

"Hokage-sama," Iruka bowed.

"Hokage-sama," Ayame bowed.

"Hokage-sama," Mina bowed.

"Hokage-sama," Hiashi bowed.

"Hokage-sama," Kakashi bowed.

"Hokage-sama," Sakura and Tayuya bowed together.

"Hokage-sama," Tsunade bowed.

Jiraiya grinned. "Don't get used to this," he bowed low and formally. "Hokage-sama,"

One by one all the people there bowed to him and acknowledged him their Hokage.

December 27th

It was the sixteenth birthday of Hyuuga Hinata, the first day she was considered old enough to be married.

Outside there was more than a foot of snow on the ground and the weather was bitterly cold. But inside the Namikaze mansion the wedding party and all the guests were warm and comfortable. As a general rule weddings were never held in Winter. Most brides preferring to marry in Spring or Summer. But both the bride and groom had insisted that they wanted to marry today. Neither of them wanted to wait even one day longer than they had to.

Dressed in his Hokage robes Naruto looked far more nervous than he had facing death. His best man smiled and leaned over to whisper to him.

"Relax Naruto," Iruka spoke. "There's nothing to be worried about."

Naruto nodded and whispered back. "I know, but I can't help it."

The wedding march began to play.

All eyes turned to the top of the aisle. There was the bride. Hinata was dressed in a formal wedding kimono. Pure silk, it was white with depictions of roses and lilies (symbols of love and faithfulness) across it. With her father at her side she walked slowly down the aisle, her hand held in her father's. As she walked her eyes never left Naruto's for even a second.

When they came before the altar Hiashi slowly and deliberately placed his daughter's hand into Naruto's. Together the couple turned to face the priest standing before them in his white blouse and billowing red pants. Smiling the priest took out a small cup and carefully filled it with ceremonial sake.

"Share in this drink as the two of you will share in all of life's joys and hardships." The priest intoned.

He handed the cup to Naruto who took a small sip. He then passed it to Hinata who also sipped from it.

"Have you come here to devote yourselves to one another of your own free will?" The priest questioned.

"Yes," Naruto answered solemnly.

"Hai," Hinata said.

The priest looked out sternly upon the assembled guests. "Can any here give just cause why these two should not be joined in sacred marriage?"

No one spoke; the priest returned his attention to the two of them. "Do you understand that the vows you make this day are spoken before Kami and before all those who have come here to bear witness?"

"Yes," Naruto said.

"Yes," Hinata said.

"Then speak the vows, and speak only the truth."

Smiling Iruka handed Naruto the smaller of the two gold rings. He then carefully slid it onto Hinata's left hand as he spoke.

"My wife, in sickness and in health I promise that I will love you, respect you, console you, be faithful to you, and protect you. From this day on until the day of my death, this I do swear."

With her hands trembling slightly Hinata took the other wedding band and placed it on Naruto's left hand.

"My husband, in sickness and in health I promise that I will love you, respect you, console you, be faithful to you, and protect you. From this day on until the day of my death, this I do swear."

The priest held his hand up. "May Kami grant you the blessings of health, happiness, and children. May your union be long and lasting. I declare that you are now husband and wife." He smiled and nodded to Naruto. "You may kiss your bride."

Naruto was only too happy to do so.

"May I present to you," the priest called out. "Namikaze Naruto and his bride, Namikaze Hinata."

As the people began to applaud and cheer the young couple broke their kiss and looked into each other's eyes.

"I love you." Naruto whispered to her.

"And I love you." Hinata answered.

They kissed once more as all around them people celebrated.

Sakura looked at Tayuya and they both smiled happily as they held hands.

"That was so beautiful!" Tenten said.

"I suppose," Neji admitted grudgingly.

"Do you think our wedding will be as beautiful?"

Neji nodded and smiled at her. "Since you'll be the bride it will be even more beautiful."

She sighed. "And of course you won't be dressed in a pink kimono. Honestly I wish Hinata would forgive you and stop humiliating you like this."

Neji looked very embarrassed. "Actually..."

Tenten looked at him curiously. "What?"

"Hinata-sama didn't make me wear this."

Tsunade sighed as the beautiful ceremony ended. "I wish I could have had a wedding day." She said wistfully.

"It's not too late you know," Jiraiya said to her. "I know someone who would love to marry you."

Tsunade looked at him and felt her face blush a little. It had been a long time since he'd come out and admitted to the feelings they both knew were there. "Is that so?" She asked carefully.

Jiraiya nodded. "His name is Jibo, he's ninety and almost blind. To him you might actually be a good catch."

She gawked at him for a second. Then...

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! "I'll kill you!"

Naruto and Sarutobi were forced to intervene to keep Jiraiya among the living.

Following the wedding a gala reception was held, also in the Namikaze mansion. And as was traditional the first dance went to the bride and groom.

Hinata slid happily into his arms, she seemed to fit perfectly.

"We're married," Naruto said. He sounded as though he could hardly believe it.

"Yes, we are married Naruto-kun, and we will always be together from now on."

He squeezed her close as they moved in time with the music. "Always," he said in a solemn promise. "I love you Hinata-chan."

"And I love you Naruto-kun."

Just a few happy words conveyed everything that needed to be said.

The End